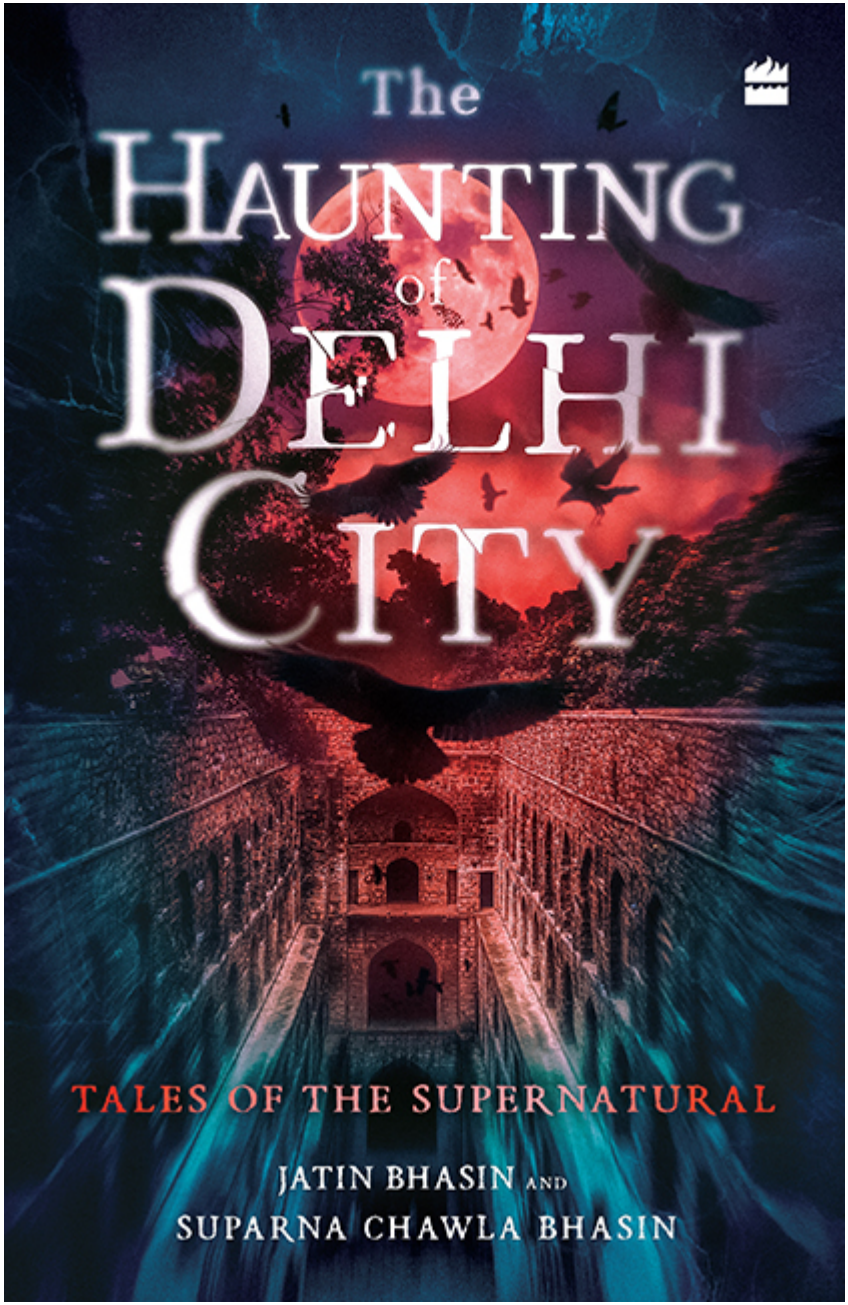
The
HAUNTING
of
DELHI
CITY
TALES OF THE SUPERNATURAL
JATIN BHASIN AND
SUPARNA CHAWLA BHASIN

The Haunting of Delhi City

TALES OF THE SUPERNATURAL

JATIN BHASIN AND SUPARNA CHAWLA BHASIN

HarperCollins *Publishers* India

For Delhi, our home

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THE SUMMER OF 1995

Summer: the worst months in Delhi, the best months in Delhi.

It was the end of the last day before school closed for two long months of summer. The clanging of the school bell at 1.30 in the afternoon had sent the school children into a frenzy. It was 1.45 p.m. now, and the chaos had settled. Most of the school kids had boarded their buses to return home, prematurely celebrating the pleasure and excitement of the forthcoming two months of routine-less, relaxed life that would give them a much-deserved break from the incessant pedagogic rantings of the teachers. Some children loitered outside the school buses, exchanging goodbyes with their friends whom they would be speaking to only over the phone for the next two months. Then there were those who were still inside the school, stealing last kisses under the desks, some in the science lab, others in the deserted corridors, a few along the sports room or the school grounds—all trying to savour the last moments before they went their ways. Senior-year girls were busy adjusting the lengths of their skirts, a daily chore for them, putting or removing safety pins from the hems of their skirts to get the desired lengths—shorter in school and longer when they were going home—the de facto lengths of the skirts determined by their mothers. Everything considered, there was a difference of about three inches between the two generations.

Amit was busy exchanging his Archie's Double Digest compilation for the Hardy Boys collection that Gaurav had. Technically, the books belonged to neither of them. Amit got the books from Shantanu, while Gaurav got them from Aasim. Both Shantanu and Aasim got them from Ashish and Vivek. It was a complex web of transactions, probably more complicated than Hawala, but promised a good time, at least for the first few afternoons of the summer holidays.

Deepak, on the other hand, was still busy saying goodbyes. Neither Amit nor Deepak took the school transportation and always walked back home together. Home was in Sarojini Nagar, about two kilometres from their school in Chanakyapuri.

One after the other, school buses started on their designated routes. Children

emptied their Milton water bottles out of the bus windows as Milton's promise to keep the water cold broke midday. And when the gust of loo hit the sweaty faces, the ties came out along with the tucked-in shirts. The bullies who 'owned the back seats' of the bus took out their Walkmans and listened to:

'*In the summertime when the weather is high, And you could stretch right up and touch the sky, Now when the weather is fine, You got women, you got women on your mind, I'm gonna drive in light and see now what I can find.'*

It was summertime indeed.

Amit and Deepak stood on the curb next to each other and waved goodbye to whoever from their class 10 cared to wave at them from the buses. Once all the buses had left and the school gates had been bolted, they untucked their shirts, rolled up the sleeves just a little bit to expose their premature biceps, loosened their ties, and walked in the direction of the holy mecca of coolness—Nirula's at Chanakyas.

Nirula's was one of the earliest western fast-food joints in Delhi. It was a place that promised the experience of modernity for conservatively raised Delhi kids. And if they failed at anything modern, they could at least enjoy devouring the epicurean delights of burgers, ice creams and shakes. It was a win-win. For the generation raised solely on homemade food supplemented with, at best, the Milkfood 100 per cent vanilla ice cream, the twenty-one ice-cream flavours of Nirula's were pure indulgence. 21 Love, Manhattan Mania, Nutty Butty, ice-cream soda and hot chocolate fudge—the HCF—Nirula's was the finish line of aspirations for middle-class schoolboys and schoolgirls.

The boys had earlier agreed upon taking Rs 15 from their parents, enough for an ice-cream soda, to celebrate their two-month parole from jail, a.k.a. school, although their taste buds tingled for HCF. But paying Rs 60 for it did not align with their middle-class upbringing. Growing up middle-class was often confusing. If you were rich, you knew what you could afford; if you were poor, you knew what you could not afford. And for school-goers who were somewhat aware of their plebeian backgrounds, decisions often hinged on their audacity to ask their parents what 'they' could afford; after all, the working middle-class existed somewhere between 'affordability' and 'unaffordability', and the process to buy something always started with '*kyu chahiye?'* Only after all the reasons, options and alternatives had been exhausted was the decision made, in favour or otherwise. But tingling or not, Deepak and Amit decided to buy one ice-cream soda, shared it, and saved the rest of the money.

On their way home, a convoy of police jeeps changed the topic of conversation between them—from mundane summer-break dreams to the rampant lootings and murders by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. It was the latest

trending topic in most middle-class colonies like Sarojini Nagar, Lodhi Road and Kidwai Nagar. The Chaddi-Baniyan Gang was called so because their chosen sartorial style for committing thefts and murders involved only underwear and vests, nothing more.

'Titu Bhaiya told me they will kill anybody who resists them. It is better to let them take what they want. What is the use of things if you get killed?' Deepak remarked casually.

'True. They also have this weird practice where after looting, they eat and take a dump in the house. Someone was saying that they rub mustard oil all over their bodies so that no one can catch hold of them,' Amit added to the listing of facts.

'My brother told me they attacked a house in AG block last week. They pulled out a sofa leg and bludgeoned the husband and wife to death as their children watched in horror,' Deepak alleged, turning his head towards the convoy that passed them. 'It was also in the newspapers. But no one knows their whereabouts. It is just too much,' he added.

'Papa has strictly told me not to play outside after eight in the evening. He wants me back home before that. But what's the point of summer holidays if we must be back at home by eight?' Amit bemoaned.

'Radhika Didi was telling me about a lady who was killed in Netaji Nagar by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. They say her ghost now roams the street to seek revenge, and the place where she lived is haunted,' Deepak remarked nervously.

'Rubbish,' retorted Amit. 'It was someone playing a prank. He was caught, and the entire colony bashed him so much that he would not even read ghost stories any more. But what are you getting all scared for? She isn't coming for you, *fattu.'* Amit laughed at Deepak's timidity.

The walk back home was always exciting for Amit and Deepak, as Sarojini Nagar market was on the way. And especially on weekends or days before the holidays when they were in no hurry to reach home, it was almost customary for them to stop at Mahendar Halwai in Babu Market. They would buy one samosa and divide it. Luckily for them, Amit liked the potato filling while Deepak liked the pastry corners, so the division was always argument free.

But today, they decided to skip the samosa and take the export market way home. The export market was a slew of open-air shops plotted along the boundary wall of the Delhi Public Library, selling imported surplus clothes at 50–60 per cent discount on the original price. There were plans to move the market inside the main Sarojini Market, but no action had been taken. Nonetheless, Amit and Deepak were never interested in clothes or discounts. Their interest was in the people who shopped there. From the fashionistas of

Delhi University to the music-video models, the hippest crowd of Delhi could be found there. They had seen Milind Soman once and, since then, often stopped there during the week, hoping to bump into a model or an actor. But today was not one of those days.

From the market, they walked past Kendriya Bhandar, the subsidized grocers for the central government employees, and then the press-wale bhaiya until they reached apni gully, a service lane between the blocks. Amit lived in GI block, and Deepak lived in DG block, opposite each other.

Amit saw his mother standing with a couple of other neighbourhood aunties, all discussing what they both had been previously discussing—the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. There was Somaiya aunty, their immediate neighbour, famous for the idlis she cooked every weekend. There was Sharma aunty, famous for the bal mithai she got for everyone in the block from her hometown, Kathgodam. And there was Chawla Aunty. It appeared that she was home early from the office. The moment Chawla Aunty saw Amit, she hollered at him.

'Arre Chote Sonu, now that your holidays have begun, we will have maths practice every evening. Okay?' Chawla Aunty was a gold medallist in maths from Punjab University and had taken it upon herself to ensure that Amit passed with flying colours in his class 10 board exams. Amit looked visibly embarrassed, more by the lack of uniqueness in his name than by Chawla Aunty's public announcement about maths classes. Every block in Sarojini Nagar had at least five Sonus. Every Sonu had a prefix. The prefix set them apart from each other. Like Chota Sonu, who was a young lad. There was Bada Sonu, older than Chota Sonu; 915-wali Sonu, because her house number was 915, and then there was Kutte-wala Sonu because he had a dog.

Amit embarrassingly looked around the block to see if Purvi had heard Chawla Aunty. Purvi was Amit's crush and lived in the building adjoining his. Like most middle-class government colonies built post-Independence, Sarojini Nagar was designed with two-storey quarters constructed around square lawns. Life in Sarojini Nagar revolved around this lawn, often called 'the ground' by the younger generation or '*skaer*' by the older generation or the grandparents, especially Punjabis. It was a hot spot for all—a place where the residents came together to discuss important issues like the one being discussed right now, the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang, and to play cricket, football, badminton, or indigenous games like pitthoo, pala, unch-neech ka papada and kanche. It was used for sleeping during the summer nights, although sleeping out in the open was rare after the 1984 riots; many used it for parties or weddings when the community halls were booked, while others used it for putting out all the furniture when their house was being painted, or during Karva Chauth to rotate thalis. This, of course,

was also a place where aunties strolled in their nighties after dinner, uncles came out to chat in their lungis, and smaller kids ran around full monty. The square was privy to the insides and the outsides of the lives of the people who resided around it. And pretty much everything one needed was available within a one-kilometre radius of these squares in Sarojini Nagar—school, dispensary, markets, bus stop, theatre and hospital. Life in middle-class South Delhi communities was comfortable, peaceful, unsparingly predictable and commonplace, which is why the onslaught of robberies and murders by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang had shaken all.

It was around five in the evening. Deepak and Amit had a couple of hours left to finish their pre-holiday ritual—getting a cable connection. For two months every summer, cable connection was approved by their respective high commands, aka Papa jis, and was a privilege that had to be earned. Once both Papa jis had permitted, albeit after much coaxing, Deepak and Amit stood in front of Prem Cable Shop at the small Ring Road market, detailing the address and other information for the connection.

'Pappu Bhaiya, when will you come to install it?' asked Amit eagerly, waiting for the cable guy to address his query. The cable guy did not respond and was distracted by a police constable from Sarojini Nagar Police Station questioning the owner of the shop. Amit asked again.

'I will come tomorrow morning,' Pappu snapped, irritated by Amit's question.

'It's still sunlight. Why can't you install it now?' Amit asked.

A sudden loud bang, followed by the words 'Chal thane!' startled Amit and Deepak. The constable banged his lathi on the table, which prompted both Amit and Deepak to step back from where they were standing.

The police constable turned towards Pappu and started to interrogate him: 'The AG block house where the robbery took place, you entered their house to install cable, nahi? You are the only stranger who entered the house that week. Did you inform the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang about them? Did you?'

Pappu grovelled on the floor in fear, grabbed the constable's foot, and said, 'I did not do anything, sahab. I installed cable in at least fifty houses in the last two weeks, but nothing happened anywhere else. Why would I do all this *jhol jhaal*?'

The constable pulled his foot away and grabbed Pappu by his collar. 'Tell this to SHO sahab in thane,' he said as he dragged him and signalled the owner of the cable shop to get into the back of the PCR van.

Amit and Deepak watched as they stood on the side, dumbfounded.

'Did all this have to happen today? What if they don't come back?' Deepak

lamented.

Amit, however, felt sympathetic towards Pappu and remarked, 'How can they just take him to the police station without proof? He was just doing his job. What proof do they have?'

As both left the shop, dismayed at the turn of events, a waft of crisp air filled with the smell of pakodas from the pakode-wali dukaan hit them. The nondescript shop on the corner of the Ring Road market did not have a sign board or a name that could authenticate its existence, but people from all nooks of Delhi gathered there every day to enjoy the lip-smacking pakodas that were served with watery mint chutney. The Khandani Pakode-wala of Sarojini Nagar. The shop had more than fifteen varieties of pakodas, even karela and baingan, but Amit and Deepak preferred paneer or gobhi. They went up to the shop and had one of each. On their way back home, they greeted the *lafandar* boys with '*Haan bhai, kya haal!*' from the other side of the street. The lafandar boys were a notorious bunch of twenty-year-olds known for their roguish ways and were supposed to be avoided by the school-going boys at all costs.

Post dinner, Amit phoned Deepak to discuss plans for the summer holidays. But something unusual and unexpected happened when he dialled his number. The line went dead for the first few seconds, and as he was about to keep the phone down, he heard a child's sobs, and then a scream. But the line went quiet again. Amit was flabbergasted. Maybe it was a cross-connection, he thought to himself. He hesitantly pressed the redial button.

The same thing happened again. The line went dead at first, but seconds later, he heard a scream and then a boy's voice, 'Bhaiya, help.'

Amit kept the phone down. All sorts of thoughts ran through his mind. Was someone at Deepak's house? Was he okay? Did the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang attack his family?

'Did I dial the wrong number?' Amit muttered under his breath.

He checked the dialled number on the screen and realized that he had misdialled the last two numbers.

'Thank god!' Amit heaved a sigh of relief. He dialled the correct number this time, and the phone rang.

'Hello!' Deepak's mother answered the phone.

Relieved to hear her voice, Amit asked, 'Aunty, is Deepak home? This is Amit.'

Deepak's mother handed over the phone to Deepak.

'Hello, haan bol,' Deepak said.

‘Hi,’ said Amit, but his mind wandered to the child’s screams. He told Deepak everything.

‘I am sure it was a cross-connection. Let me try the number once,’ Deepak casually said and asked for the number.

Amit gave the phone number to Deepak and kept the phone down.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang. Amit nervously picked it up on the first ring. It was Deepak.

‘Wh—who was that boy, and why was he screaming like that?’

‘I don’t know. It was scary. What should we do now?’ Amit asked, hoping Deepak would have some idea.

Before Deepak could answer, Amit said, ‘Hold on, I am getting another call. It could be Papa. I will call you back.’

‘Hello!’ Amit spoke into the mouthpiece.

It was the boy on the other side, sobbing.

He immediately disconnected the phone and called Deepak, but his phone was busy. Deepak called back within a few seconds of Amit disconnecting.

Both blurted at the same time: ‘It was him!’

After a few seconds of silence, Deepak nervously said, ‘Should we tell someone? Whoever the boy is, he is in trouble for sure.’

Amit composed himself and offered a counter view. ‘It could be someone playing a prank as well, right? We don’t know what it is. We have just heard a voice.’

‘Let us wait for a few days and see what happens. And let us try to look up that number.’

Amit and Deepak started calling their friends and shared their experience, part willingly, part scared, and part basking in the adulation they received from everyone, especially the girls. Soon the word spread, and many South Delhi school kids were dialling the number thinking it was a prank.

For the first few days of the phone number leak, the atmosphere was intensely exciting for Amit and Deepak. But as the gossip started to settle, curiosity about the phone number and the boy piqued Amit’s interest. As if to justify the free time on his hands during the summer break, he wanted to explore this episode and see where it led him. He shared his intent with Deepak, who agreed, although only on the surface, to investigate and gather more information about the number.

The next day, Amit went to the MTNL office at Bhikaji Cama Place, to try his luck at getting more information. Amit entered the office and found it like any other government office, full of old metal chairs that tolerated the ever-increasing weights of the government staff, distressed tables, and steel almirahs that stored files and dust. Amit looked around for the inquiry counter, which was about four

metres from the entrance on the left. A blue signboard hung on the glass frame by a metal chain and had 'Inquiry' written in white. A stout, overweight, and overwhelmed middle-aged man sat in the chair behind the glass.

Amit approached the counter and said, 'Excuse me, Uncle. I am looking for some information regarding a phone number. Can you help?'

'We don't give details of the numbers like that,' said the man from behind the counter without looking at Amit.

'Uncle, please, it's very important,' Amit almost begged.

'Must be a girl's number, huh! And you want to know the address? I get kids like you every day. Go away, don't waste my time,' the man spoke brusquely, prompting stares from others near him.

Embarrassed by how the man spoke to him, Amit walked out of the office and murmured to himself, 'I must figure out some other way to get the details.' He picked up his bike and rode home.

Deepak was sitting on Amit's porch, waiting for his return. As Amit parked his bike on the side of the porch, Deepak asked, 'Did you get any information about the number?'

'No, we will have to find some other way. Did you get a call from that number again?' Amit was anxious to know.

'No, and I hope we never do. It is terrifying. There was another robbery and murder in BK Dutt Colony yesterday.'

BK Dutt Colony was near Sarojini Nagar. However, unlike Sarojini Nagar, BK Dutt Colony was not government housing but largely private, and mainly consisted of refugees who had moved from Pakistan.

'Is it not the third robbery in the last three weeks in BK Dutt Colony?' Amit asked, confirming what he had heard the day before.

'Yes, most families are shop owners at Khanna market or Meherchand market, so they keep cash at home. Easy targets. Most robberies also involved the murders of women and children.'

As soon as Deepak said this, the phone rang and startled them.

Amit's mother picked up the phone and spoke.

'Hello!'

'Hello!'

'Hello!'

There was silence.

'Well, looks like whoever it was didn't like my voice,' goaded Amit's mother, implying it was a girl who wanted to speak to Amit.

Amit's eyes met Deepak's, and in an instant, he picked up the phone to call his mother.

Deepak's mother picked up the phone.

'Mummy, did someone call just now?' Deepak asked.

'Yes, someone did call but disconnected when I said hello. Deepak, you can tell your friends or girlfriends I do not bite; they can talk to me. What is with these blank calls?'

Deepak's face went pale, and his hands trembled as he looked at Amit. He could not say anything, but Amit figured out everything by looking at his washed-out face. The uncanniness of the events made them uncomfortable and wordless. But moments later, the silence between them was interrupted by the sound of a scooter. Amit's Papa ji was back from work and was parking his Bajaj scooter outside. Standing by the window, Amit saw his Papa ji pulling out the briefcase and lunchbox from the carabiner under the front seat.

As he entered the room, Papa ji exclaimed, 'Whose house is this? Whose kids are these? Cannot be mine. My kids are never at home at this time!' Papa ji laughed at his joke as Amit's mother rushed from the kitchen with a glass of water.

'Chai lau*?*' asked Amit's mother in the same vein as she had done every evening for the past twenty-five years.

Papa ji sat on the sofa after adjusting the crochet cover on it.

'Haan, peete hain!' replied Papa ji.

Amit thought of checking with his Papa ji about the number.

'Papa ji, do you know someone in MTNL? Or at least can you tell us which area this phone number belongs to?' he asked nervously while writing the phone number down on a piece of paper.

'I don't know anyone in MTNL, but I can try the area code. Why do you need to know?'

'Umm, one of our friends is getting blank calls from this number, and he was wondering if we knew about the area code,' said Amit trying to sound as convincing as possible.

'Boys these days! They will do everything except study. If I ever come to know that you are doing something like this, I will break your bones. Show me the number.'

Amit handed over the piece of paper to his father.

Papa ji opened his telephone diary and rummaged through the numbers to see other phone numbers with similar area codes. By the time Amit's mother got the tea, Papa ji had found the area code.

'Ah, got it. This is for the area around BK Dutt Colony.' He paused

momentarily but continued, 'Today, in the office, too, the conversations were all about BK Dutt Colony.'

'Were you discussing the robberies and murders by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang?' Amit asked, casually, to appear disinterested in what Papa ji had mentioned.

'Yes, that and the rumours regarding some bodies being exhumed from Karbala,' Papa ji replied.

'Karbala?' Deepak and Prashant were confused. ' Isn't that in Saudi?'

'Yes, but there is also one in Delhi, named after the Karbala in Saudi, where Hussain was buried. This Karbala in BK Dutt Colony is a Shiite burial ground. It is exclusively for the Tazias, the ritual coffins of Imam Husain Ibn Ali, the prophet's grandson. On the tenth day of Muharram every year, Shiite mourners from Old Delhi, Mehrauli and Nizamuddin gather here to commemorate the martyrdom of Husain, who was killed in a battle at Karbala, in modern-day Iraq.'

Amit's father continued, 'It has many graves, including the grave of Maha Khanum, wife of emperor Shah Alam II. Although nobody has been buried here since 1985, there is a rumour that two bodies were exhumed yesterday from the site, and it seemed like they were buried recently.'

'Amit, it is getting late. I should go home now.' Deepak stood up abruptly and walked towards the door. Amit followed him. The apprehension on both their faces was apparent.

'I am pretty sure all these three incidents are somehow interlinked—the boy on the phone, murders by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang, and the bodies found at Karbala,' Amit said, hesitatingly.

Deepak looked visibly shaken.

'Look, Amit, I am scared and don't want to be involved in this any more. I mean graveyards, bodies, phone calls with screams! Let us just tell our parents about the phone call and let them handle it.'

'Do you think they will believe us if we tell them? They will say that we have been watching too many movies or sleeping late and will put an end to all our plans for the summer. You know how parents are. I am scared as well, but this is exciting too. And it is not like we are going to graveyards in the middle of the night,' Amit tried to pacify Deepak.

'You do whatever you want, Amit, but keep me out of it. And do not talk to me either, till the time you are involved in all this,' Deepak was visibly rattled by the turn of events.

'Deepak, we have always done everything together. I bunked classes with you to watch movies. I took the entire blame for bursting crackers in the school toilet so that you wouldn't get suspended. Will you not do this with me?' Amit felt let

down by the sudden change in Deepak's attitude.

'I never forced you to do anything. You did it because you wanted to,' said Deepak as he walked away from Amit.

Amit was cross but went inside, more determined to get to the root of the matter. In his imagination, he visualized being hailed for his heroism, being awarded a bravery medal by the President for solving the case of the crying boy, and Deepak's pale, washed-out face.

Amit spent the rest of the evening coming up with a plan and preparing for its execution. The plan was simple: he would start by visiting all the three houses where the robberies took place and try to find if any boys lived in any of them. He also planned to visit the Karbala graveyard and ask about the bodies that were exhumed from there.

The next day, early morning, Amit asked his mother to pack two aloo parathas for lunch. 'I have a cricket match at Lakshmi Bai Nagar. It's a fifty-over match, so I will be there till evening,' Amit said, ready to counter any argument from his mother. Since so much was happening at BK Dutt Colony, he did not want to disclose that he was going there and lied about a cricket match in Lakshmi Bai Nagar, located between Sarojini Nagar and BK Dutt Colony. Luckily, no counter was thrown at him except '*Time se aa jayeo ghar*.'

Amit rode his bike to the colony. 'Plenty of time to go through all the three houses before evening,' he said to himself as he looked for the first house where the murders took place. The house was the last one in an array of congested builder floors in a gully. Amit went up to the main door and found it locked. He looked around to see if any window could give him an inside view or a clue, although he was unsure of what he was looking for.

'What do you want? Who are you?' a voice spooked Amit.

Amit looked around to see where the voice came from and found an old man standing to his right. It was the next-door neighbour.

'I know this house was robbed by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. I just came to make sure everybody is okay now. I read about the case in the newspaper.' Amit tried to sound as calm as possible.

'You kids, didn't you read the whole story? The only person who lived in the house, Mehra ji, was murdered by the gang. His wife died a few months ago and they had no kids. So, nobody lives here any more,' said the neighbour.

'Oh. Thank you, Uncle. This is extremely helpful. By any chance, do you have their phone number?' Amit knew it was a stupid question considering Mehra ji was dead, but he still wanted to see if it was the same number he had

dialled.

'Mehra ji didn't have a phone. If anybody needed to talk to him, they called on our landline,' said the neighbour, irked at Amit's question.

'Oh, I am sure he would have been treating your son as his own, as he was so lonely. Do you have any grandchildren at home?' Amit thought if he got the answer to this, he would at least know if there were any kids in his house.

The neighbour, peeved by Amit, shouted in response, 'What? I do not have any sons or grandchildren. And what kind of stupid questions are you asking? Go get lost now, or I will call the police and complain that you are snooping around.'

Amit left the house as quickly as he could but with an implicit assurance that no child lived there. He struck off the address from the list he had made. And although it was an awkward experience, he felt more confident than ever while looking for the other houses. He picked up his bike and rode towards the next.

It took Amit ten minutes to reach the second house on Lal Masjid Road. The house was on a desolate stretch of land, almost buried in thick bushes. The walls of the house were covered in mud, and the wooden window frames were hanging by the hinges. The house was dilapidated, and it was impossible to believe that someone was living there. The front door was in a slightly better condition but showed signs of damage too.

Amit hesitated for a second and took a deep breath. He mustered the courage to ring the doorbell.

In his heart, Amit knew that no one would respond, and after what seemed like a long time, he turned around to go to the next house on the list. But as he was about to step forward, Amit heard someone from inside the house.

'Who is it?'

Amit wished he had done some homework and prepared answers to such questions. He stumbled to reply but ultimately turned around and said, 'I stay in the neighbourhood. I just wanted to check if you are doing okay after the robbery.'

The man replied, 'What? Why? Go away, we don't want to talk to anyone.'

'Can I come in?' Amit said as he pressed his ears to the door, thinking he had heard someone sobbing.

Were they the sobs of the same boy, Amit wondered.

The sobs slowly turned into wails, but along with them, he could also hear chanting. As the wailing got louder, so did the chanting. Amit could smell the camphor burning away. He rang the bell again. There was silence, but seconds later, he heard muffled voices. Amit banged on the door again and heard a shuffling echo of footsteps heading towards the door.

'Please help me! Please!' said someone from behind the doors.

It was a boy's voice. Amit stood by the door, frozen in fear. He heard the boy call out again.

Amit stood there petrified, not knowing how to help. He banged on the door repeatedly and rang the bell while looking around to see if he could find someone to help him rescue the boy. A sense of regret overwhelmed Amit. He did not want to be alone. Not like this. Amit mustered the last ounce of courage left in him and struck the door with both hands.

'Who is it?' said a voice from inside. It was an adult male voice now.

'It's me, Amit. I want to speak to the boy. Let me talk to him,' Amit replied, using all the willpower he had in him.

'There is no boy here. Go away and don't come back.'

'If you don't let me in, I will call the police and tell them you have kidnapped a boy.'

A man with a diminutive appearance opened the door.

Amit stood at the door and could see ten or twelve people in long white robes sitting in a circle, while two men held a boy in the centre. The boy appeared to be around ten years old, struggling to break free from their clutches, sobbing and wailing. An array of diyas was lit in a semi-circle in front of the boy.

'We have not kidnapped anybody. This is my son,' said the man in a strained voice.

'Then why have you held the boy down? What are you doing to him?' Amit screamed.

Suddenly, the boy let out a cry of anguish.

'The robbers stabbed my wife in front of my son. He lunged at one of the attackers to save his mother, but they caught him, tied him up and chopped off two of his fingers. My wife bled to death, and my little boy is scarred for life,' the man said. 'Since that day, my son has been in shock. He does not recognize anybody, not even me. He gets agitated and attacks anyone who comes near him, and within minutes, he starts sobbing and crying for help.'

Amit was convinced that it was the same boy on the phone crying for help. He asked in a gruff voice, 'He has already gone through so much pain and trauma. Why are you treating him like this?'

'Because our Guru ji prescribed this ritual to cure him. All these people are our brothers and sisters from the Ashram. This will bring back his memories. Now go, leave us alone. We have given you all the answers.'

A burly figure approached the door just as Amit was going to retort. A quick glance at the man convinced him to turn around and leave the place.

He struck off the third house from the list and decided to tell his parents the entire story and ask them to help the boy. He had solved the case. But more than

that, Amit indulged himself in the thoughts of his name appearing in a newspaper article for exposing the boy's ordeal, and about being surrounded by his schoolmates, telling them how bravely he investigated the case of the sobbing boy.

Amit left the house and was on his way home through a secluded bylane of Karbala Road when he heard someone shout from a distance.

'Excuse me, can you help me?' the voice said.

Amit looked around but could not find anyone near him.

'I am here,' said the voice. This time, the voice was accompanied by a tapping sound. Amit looked in the direction of the sound and spotted a house at a distance, to his right. It was a boy looking out of a window.

'Hello, Bhaiya, can you come inside and help me, please? The door is on the backside and it's open,' the boy said.

Amit's confidence was soaring as he had solved the case of the boy on the phone. He was now determined to help this boy too. He looked around once more and said, 'Okay. I will be there in a minute.'

Amit followed the directions given by the boy. The entrance to the back door was through a narrow gully that looked more like a trench than a secured path. He went through the gully to the back of the house. The door there was slightly ajar. Amit hesitated at first but stepped inside.

The boy was now standing in front of Amit. Thin, wearing blue shorts and a grey T-shirt. And sunglasses.

Maybe he has conjunctivitis, Amit thought to himself. But conjunctivitis season was a few months away. What could be the reason, Amit wondered.

'Hello, Bhaiya. How are you? Thanks for coming. I knew you would come to help me. My name is Nakul. Can we be friends?'

Not many called Amit 'Bhaiya'. He somehow felt more responsible for the boy now. But Nakul's sudden need to make him his friend made him uneasy. After all, they had just met.

'Hello, Nakul. We can surely be friends. What help do you need? Why are you wearing sunglasses at home?'

Nakul deflected Amit's questions and was more interested in knowing how Amit spent his last day at school before the start of the summer holidays.

'How was your last day before the summer holidays, Bhaiya? Did you get lots of library books for the holidays? Did you go out with your friends for ice cream? Did you say bye to all your friends?'

'Yes, I did. I got books and went to Nirula's with my friends,' replied Amit, irritated at the boy's questions.

Before Amit could ask him why he needed help, Nakul added, 'I could not do

any of it because of my father. All the robberies happening in BK Dutt Colony are not being carried out by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. They have been committed by my father and his associates. He knows all those in the colony who keep money in their homes, so he robbed them and made it look like it was done by the Chaddi-Baniyan Gang. If he suspects anyone, he murders them too.'

Amit was shocked but also thrilled at the possibility of him becoming a hero in the eyes of everyone if he got the secret out. But his thoughts were interrupted by Nakul.

'Yes. My mother overheard him talking to his associates, planning the next robbery, and when she tried to stop him, my father caught hold of her, wrapped the phone wire around her neck, and strangled her to death. He saw me watching and came after me too. He dragged me to the phone and used the same wire to strangle me. I kept shouting for help while pressing numbers on the phone, hoping someone would pick up the phone and come to help me. When I heard you on the phone, I knew you would come to help me.'

Amit got distracted by mud falling off Nakul's head as he moved his hand through his hair.

'Oh, sorry, this mud is from the graveyard; it just keeps falling from my body. My father and his associates buried me and my mother in the Karbala graveyard in the dead of night and told others that we had gone away for summer vacations. But the next day, we just stood up and walked back. I heard that they found our bodies, but we came back home. I want to go out and see my school, get books from the library, eat ice cream, play with my friends, and go to the hills like my friends. But while I do that, I want you to be here taking care of my mother and protecting her if my father comes back. Would you do that?'

The colour started to drain from Amit's face. Amit felt a gush of cold air around him, and the hair on his neck rose. He let out a fake laugh and said, 'Nice story. I will leave now.' Amit was about to run, but Nakul caught hold of his arm.

'No, Bhaiya, this is not a story. See, see for yourself!' Nakul removed his sunglasses, exposing something that horrified Amit: dark sockets full of squirming maggots instead of eyes. Amit felt faint and heard someone call out to him from behind.

'Amit! Sit down,' a soft female voice said.

Amit felt something cold on his shoulder. As he turned his head to see what it was, he saw a hand—pale skin with blue veins popping out—and a large gold kangan on the wrist. A chill ran down his spine. He could not understand how she got behind him. Amit was standing against the wall. He turned around and was now face-to-face with Nakul's mother, her body partly in the wall and partly out. Fear became tangible as Nakul's mother crept up to Amit like a hungry

beast. He was immobilized. Fear sucked the very last breath from Amit's body. She looked directly into his eyes. Amit shut his eyes, hoping it was all a nightmare or a prank. He wanted to run back home. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his left eye. He let out a scream and covered his eye with his hand. Nakul's mother had lacerated it.

She let go of Amit and scoffed at Nakul. 'If you go, Amit will have to stay.'

Amit found himself clinging to hope and thought to himself, 'She cannot be evil. She was calling the police on her husband when she found he was a killer. She cannot kill. She is a victim herself.'

But a sinister laugh broke his chain of thoughts.

'I did not threaten him because he was a murderer and a thief. I threatened him because he would not share the loot with me,' Nakul's mother said as she looked at her kangan while Nakul hugged her lovingly.

Amit saw a window of opportunity to run. He leapt towards the door but stumbled over the side table that had the phone on it and fell. Nakul wrapped the phone cord around his neck. Amit gasped for air. He tried to resist, but his efforts were in vain. Amit's face began to change colour, and he lay listless on the floor.

But just before Amit breathed his last, Nakul said, 'I told you. I need you to stay here to take care of my mother. You can leave this house only when you get someone else to care for her. Just like I got you.'

A few days later, the police found Amit's dead body in the house, the telephone cord wrapped around his neck. If anyone dialled this number, they could hear Amit's screams. Now, Amit tries to get someone to care for Nakul's mother so he can leave the house.

Ask anyone who was a teenager in the nineties. Most will tell you that they tried calling that number in the summer of '95.

Summer. The worst months of Delhi. The best months of Delhi.

SATURDAY NIGHT

It was late Saturday evening. Kapoor stared pensively at the nameplate on his desk, a solid rectangular block of mahogany wood, a gold aluminium bar with his name engraved in black—Kamal Kapoor SHO Daryaganj. He often dwelled on his embossed name against the gold backdrop. It looked constricted; his designation shoved to the bottom right under his name—true to what his job had started to feel like, shrunken and restricted. Each day, the job felt like a saddle on his shoulders, its weight pounding on his clavicle. Under the desk, his right foot tapped nervously—the onslaught of anxiousness he had been reeling under for the past few weeks made him twitchy. The wavering of his mind accompanied the pace of his tapping foot. The case was a maze. No alibi, witnesses, or even a drop of blood. All they had were three dead bodies and three coins. Kapoor had been on police vigil since five in the morning. This Saturday was important, and he wanted it to end just like it had started, without a furore. *Just a few more hours to go*, he thought to himself. Kapoor had his team spread across the length and breadth of Daryaganj, Khooni Darwaza and Kotla.

'Not today. Not today,' he mumbled, his words prayer-like.

Every Saturday night for the past three weeks, murders were reported near Khooni Darwaza on Bahadhur Shah Zafar Marg. Three murders, three Saturdays.

The area had experienced its own share of anti-social elements. Minor crimes like carjacking and pickpocketing were commonplace, but the gruesome rape of a medical student in 2005 dealt a massive blow to the police. After the incident, the police were under pressure to increase patrolling and surveillance in the area. Things had improved until the murders started three weeks ago.

It was 10.30 at night when Kapoor concluded a status update with his team. No untoward incident was reported, but to comfort his own spirits, he decided against sitting in his office and joined his team on the field.

'Sohan, Gaurav, Jain!' Kapoor called as he rose from the chair.

'Gadi nikalo, round pe jana hai.'

As he stepped out of his room, his cell phone rang. It was Inspector Ram Singh.

Kapoor, overwrought with anxiety, picked up the phone, fearing the worst.

Ram Singh would not have called otherwise, thought Kapoor to himself. Instinctively, he knew they had another murder on their hands. The fourth murder. Ram Singh confirmed it. The police had discovered a dead body on Feroz Shah Kotla Marg, under the same circumstances as the others.

Kapoor reached the murder site and saw his team and the forensic experts behind the police barricades looking for circumstantial evidence. A small crowd had gathered by the police barriers. A crowd at a deserted place like this surprised Kapoor even more. More agitated than before, he cut through the crowd to reach Ram Singh.

Ram Singh turned towards him and saluted.

'Sir. Male, thirty-five years old, owner of an electricity store in Bhagirathi Market. The circumstances under which the death occurred are like the ones we have seen before. His younger brother died in the fire at Bhagirathi Market a few days ago. Just like the other three victims, he too was last seen leaving the morgue at Maulana Azad Medical College. A sole eyewitness saw his car swerving and losing control before it hit the tree. The witness did not see anyone else in the car. He rushed to the car to help, but the victim was unresponsive. It is just the jewellery he was wearing that is missing. His phone, laptop, cell phone, wallet, everything is intact. There was about Rs 50,000 in his bag, which has not been touched. And there is an old coin in his clenched fist.'

'The most intriguing part …' Ram added after a pause, '… a coin and not a drop of blood anywhere. Just like the ones before. It does not appear that the victim died due to the crash. The body is being retrieved from the car and will be taken for autopsy, but I think we will get the same result as others. Death due to strangulation.'

Kapoor wanted to scream at everyone. He repressed the urge to lambaste his team and their inability to find the perpetrators of the crime. At the same time, he felt ashamed of his own incompetence in comparison to the adroitness that the murderers exhibited—the case had infiltrated the peace in his life. The possibility of an inadvertent oversight on their part vexed him even more. Ram Singh's words echoed in his mind. In all the cases, the cars had crashed into a wall or a tree, and the victims were dead and had coins in their clenched fists. Not a single drop of blood. And all deaths were due to strangulation, but no evidence of anyone else around the victims had been found.

As the police recovered the victim's body from the car, a wave of angst choked everyone around. Despondency hit Kapoor like a speeding train and scotched his intent to investigate the crime scene further. Kapoor decided to conclude the official documentation of the crime in the thana and drove back with Ram Singh.

It was almost three in the morning. Documentation was taking longer than Kapoor had anticipated. The immoderate intricacies of the case had embroiled Kapoor and his team in a web of confusion. The thana was quiet and heavy with languor. Ram could not help but notice the palpable discomfiture on Kapoor's face and said, 'Sir, I think we should get ourselves some tea. We can go to Jafar's stall; it would be open at this hour. Fresh air will do us some good.'

Kapoor took comfort in Ram's suggestion and nodded in agreement.

Jafar had been speculating on the influx of police cars in the area for the past few weeks. Since evening, every passing police car ruffled the tranquillity of his stall and his mind. The recent crimes in the area made him anxious as he conjectured his own theory on the murders. Jafar had spent most of his adulthood making tea in the stall and was privy to the lives of many. He often wallowed in the treasure of knowledge he had hoarded over the years about those who shared with him tidbits of their personal lives—their joys, sorrows, fears, and life in general—but Jafar had always displayed a nonchalant demeanour that relieved others of the fear of being judged. He took pride in lending an ear, a skill most people disregarded.

Ram stopped the police car in front of Jafar's stall.

'*Do chai, Jafar mian,'* Ram hollered. Jafar glanced at Ram and raised his hand in acknowledgement but wondered at Kapoor's presence. Ram was a regular at the stall. The stall was a go-to place for much of the police staff, especially on nights deemed dull by the police standards. Jafar's chai had a uniqueness; it was adjudged to be the only thing that could fight the indolence of the policemen who frequented his stall in the wee hours. No one had ever seen the pateela in which the chai was made—the stove was behind a ripped Dalda tin that enclosed the perimeter of the cooking area. The regulars at the stall speculated that Jafar never made it from scratch. Some concoction of loose tea leaves, milk, and sugar was always simmering behind the tin enclosure. Jafar was always seen adding milk, tea, and an unsparing amount of sugar to adjust to the demand for chai—cloying nectar that was never allowed to be depleted.

Jafar knew most of Ram's co-workers but had never seen Kapoor before. Dismissing his curiosity about Kapoor, he busied himself with making tea. At the same time, Kapoor and Ram exhausted themselves, reflecting on the events of the past three weeks and drawing conclusions that proved wrong when they reasoned with them.

Jafar walked up to the police car holding plastic teacups from the top. Ram took the teacups from Jafar and handed a cup to Kapoor, who was busy sifting

through the notes of a pocket notebook that he carried with him, which comprised all the details of the murders, in hopes of finding a clue that he might have missed.

'Let us go through the events again,' Kapoor said while rummaging through his notes.

'All the murders have been carried out in the same manner, janab—all four of them,' Ram said, bringing the teacup to his mouth to take a sip. 'All the victims visited the morgue to see a family member's body. There is a pattern. They left the morgue late at night and all passed through Khooni Darwaza. Then, at some or other deserted location near Khooni Darwaza, their cars sped up and swerved as if the drivers had lost control and rammed into a wall, tree or sidewalk. There was no trace of anyone else around the scene. All victims were found dead, and all had one coin clenched in their fists. After interrogation, the family members revealed that the jewellery the victims wore was missing. There was not a drop of blood anywhere, not in the car, not on the clothes, nor on the road. Cause of death—strangulation. Somebody strangled them in a moving car, disappeared within seconds without anyone noticing, and left no trace!'

'I have not seen a case like this in my twenty years of police service. Nothing makes sense. It doesn't piece together; there is no logic to any of this,' Kapoor remarked, exasperated.

Ram took a last sip of tea from his cup and looked around impassively. The lights of Feroz Shah Kotla illumined the sky in stark contrast to the darkness that enveloped the remains of the Khooni Darwaza. He often pondered on the ensanguined history of the place. His ancestors had lived in its vicinity for many years; its history and secrets were informally chronicled by Ram's forefathers—his family's trove that contained the tainted history of the place—the secrets of the Darwaza passed down from one generation to the other unceremoniously, colloquially and in conversations, not copies. Growing up, he had often heard his grandparents talk of Khooni Darwaza just as they had heard from their grandparents—the gruesome massacre of thousands by Nadir Shah, the ruthless murders of Bahadur Shah Zafar's sons and grandson by Captain William Hudson, and the aftermath. Ram's older brother, too, had witnessed the murder of refugees at Khooni Darwaza during the partition riots. The site was painfully embroiled in a series of slaughters, massacres, and executions—its walls, many believed, now leaked the crimson that flows in our veins.

Ram exclaimed, abruptly shattering the silence in the car, '*Janab*, *yeh Khooni Darwaza hai*. Some things that people have seen here have no explanation. This place has seen more deaths and misery than any other place in Delhi. I know you do not believe in such a phenomenon, but many of my family members claim to

have seen headless bodies or apparitions roaming near the Darwaza. There are frequent ghost and spirit sightings, and many have seen and felt the presence of spirits of the wandering refugees. Some even vouch for having seen such apparitions running after vehicles.' The ingrained beliefs that Ram had held for long suddenly effused along with his fear and bewilderment at the prospect of all of it turning out to be true.

But for Kapoor, Ram's conjectures had no credence. Irked at the absurdity of it all, Kapoor rebuked him, 'Ram, enough of this gibberish. Do not expect me to believe this nonsense. You can tell these ghost stories to the DCP in our next meeting. Till then, keep your mouth shut if you have nothing substantial to add.' Kapoor gave a momentary unforgiving look to Ram and continued sifting through his notes, looking for something that could give them a potential lead. But the notes continued to frustrate Kapoor. He scrutinized all the names, locations and details. The case was a labyrinth that he needed to circumvent. Exhausted by the number of times he had rummaged through the notes, he slammed the notebook on the car's dashboard. But a fleeting glance at a name in the notes roused something in him. Roshan Sharma. He realized that he had forgotten about the hospital's medical examiner. Roshan had gone missing around the same time the murders started. An array of thoughts ran through Kapoor's mind. All the victims were seen at the morgue before they were murdered. Kapoor speculated if his absence was related to the murders in any way.

Roshan had taken over the job from Sher Singh, who served as the medical examiner for Maulana Azad Medical College hospital for over thirty years and had retired three weeks ago. Roshan was reported missing a week after he took charge of the morgue. He was last seen entering the morgue but never left it. CCTV cameras also confirmed it. Roshan's disappearance was noticed by an orderly who found the morgue's door ajar and an unsupervised dissected body on the autopsy table.

The incongruity of the events infuriated Kapoor further. 'I swear, it is tempting to blame all this on Ram's ghost mumbo-jumbo than trying to make any sense of it,' Kapoor blurted out but regretted instantaneously noticing the smug look on Ram's face.

To ensure there were no loose ends, Kapoor decided to meet the hospital's Chief Medical Officer.

For more than four years, Rakesh Chhabra had been successfully discharging his duties as the Chief Medical Officer at Maulana Azad hospital. But the past few

weeks had turned the hospital into a place of frenzy—the victims of the murders were brought there for autopsies, and now there was a missing staff member. The onslaught from the press, the police and the public was unrelenting.

As soon as Rakesh saw Kapoor entering his room, he asked, 'Any news of Roshan? Did you speak to Sher Singh?'

A dejected Kapoor answered, 'No. We have not been able to trace Roshan or even Sher Singh. But that is why we are here. Can you tell us more about them?'

Rakesh sighed at Kapoor's comment and paused before answering, 'Sher Singh worked here for over thirty years. He was a bit reserved and interacted with others only when required. Since Roshan's disappearance, I have tried my best to contact Sher Singh but have not been successful. Staff members who live in his neighbourhood haven't seen him either. I think it is time that you launch a formal search for both.'

'Great!' Kapoor muttered under his breath. 'Now we have four murders and two missing persons.' He shook his head in disbelief and incredulity; all investigations were without any leads or evidence.

Kapoor's rumination was interrupted by Rakesh's assistant, Prakash, who entered the room without announcing.

'Sir,' Prakash said.

'What is it, Prakash?' Rakesh retorted, irked by the eagerness in Prakash's voice.

'Sir, it is about the construction of the new wing next to the morgue …'

'Yes, what about it? Quickly, Prakash, I do not have the time,' Rakesh interjected.

'I told you that the ASI team was called earlier. The ASI Officer, Sunil Yadav, informed me that they had discovered something. It looks like there was an old, eighteenth- or nineteenth-century building at the site. He has asked for a meeting with you.'

'Okay, set up a meeting with him tomorrow. It is Dussehra, but I can meet if he is fine with it,' Rakesh replied hastily before turning to Kapoor and said, 'It will be good if you can also come for the meeting. Since the morgue is the centre of the action, it would be better if you also knew what is going on in and around the place.'

Kapoor nodded, affirming his presence, but doubted the plausibility of the meeting or how it would be helpful to the case. But the investigations had strung out long enough to attract a lot of attention, and Kapoor was welcoming of any piece of information he could get.

It was Dussehra.

Rakesh and Kapoor met at the excavation site, while Ram Singh waited in the police car. Yadav was already at the site, inspecting the area.

Yadav shook hands with Kapoor and Rakesh, and introduced himself, 'Thank you for meeting me. Myself Sunil Yadav, ASI officer in charge of this site.' Both Rakesh and Kapoor introduced themselves in response.

'Yadav ji, so what have you discovered so far and how can we help you?' asked Rakesh, inspecting the area, expecting it to look like a heritage site in some way, but to his disappointment, the excavation site was a pit-like structure; the basement was almost ten metres deep and a hundred-metres wide.

Standing at the pit's edge, Yadav turned towards Rakesh and Kapoor and said, 'These are the remnants of an early nineteenth-century jail, but its history goes back a century further. This was an eighteenth-century *sarai* during the Mughal period, which was turned into a *phasighar* or a hanging house used for executions by the Britishers. I think we can attribute the incarceration of the alleged conspirators of the 1912 Hardinge Bomb Case—Master Amir Chand, Master Awadh Behari, Basant Sanyal, and Lala Hanumant Sahai—to this place. It is a place of historical importance. However, while these are interesting findings, it is not the reason I wanted to speak with you.' Yadav continued in a practical, matter-of-fact tone, 'This is all verifiable information that my team has complete understanding of and control over. But there are a few unusual things that my team has observed. I wanted to know if you had any information about them.'

'Go ahead, Yadav ji. We will try out best to help you,' Rakesh replied.

Yadav continued, 'Like I said, before this place was converted into a jail, it was a sarai and had a few underground cellars. These cellars have scribblings of an almost two-hundred-year-old language, spoken only by a particular set of people. Now, here is the part that we do not understand. Some of these wall scribblings are two hundred years old but some are fairly new, perhaps written a few months or years ago. What we do not understand is that, firstly, no one uses this language any more; and secondly, even if someone uses it, how did they get into this cellar, which was below the ground up until a few days ago?'

'We also found potlis full of jewellery and coins dating back to the eighteenth century. The oldest coins were at least three hundred years old. But some of the potlis had coins and jewellery that are used today. Who all have access to the place adjoining this area? We have not been able to find any secret passage, entry, or exit points to this site from the area where we are standing. The only possibility is the morgue, which is adjoining this. But it is hard to ascertain any passage from there as well. I wanted to know if you have seen anything like it

anywhere else in the hospital or if you have some information about the hospital or the morgue when it was built. We have the blueprint of the hospital, but it seems to be misleading as it does not factor in the morgue site. Was it added later to the hospital building?'

Yadav showed the picture of the scribblings on his phone. Rakesh looked at Yadav and almost instantly took out his phone and showed him a photograph of similar jottings on the morgue walls.

'It's the same writing! Where did you find this?' Yadav asked earnestly.

'Come with me,' Rakesh replied. Kapoor and Yadav followed him.

The morgue was located at the end of the hospital's B wing, connected through a tunnel-like conduit that stretched for at least half a kilometre, as if the morgue was a cast-down part of the hospital. The corridor ended at the entrance to the morgue, with no other outlet or rooms in between.

Rakesh opened the morgue doors and let himself in, while Kapoor and Yadav followed his lead. The morgue was a long, narrow space that resembled a compartment coach. Anyone standing at the main doors could get a complete view of the morgue in its entirety. The main doors were the only passage to the morgue; there were no other entry or exit points. The refrigeration units were placed along the length and breadth of the wall to the right and appeared like small steel capsules. The opposite wall had five autopsy extraction stations attached to the sinks located at a distance from each other. The space was brighter than the hospital halls; the ceiling-mounted bulbs were the only light source. There were no windows or casements, only a small room towards the left used by the morgue staff for paperwork. The door to this room was somewhat hidden by a steel cabinet.

Rakesh walked towards the door and opened it. The door opened into a compact room inundated with paperwork, files, and administrative correspondence. Rakesh pointed his finger towards the right end of the room, behind the papers and files, and said, 'This is the wall. Please look carefully.' The wall had the same scribbles and marks that were noticed by Yadav at the site.

Yadav cleared the way to closely examine the writing on the wall, while Kapoor turned towards Rakesh and said, 'Rakesh ji, why didn't you show this to us?' Kapoor was puzzled at the new piece of information that was uncovered. 'We could have investigated this as well, considering now we have two missing people from this hospital.'

'Kapoor ji, I was told about this yesterday after you left. While looking for a case report, a junior doctor came across this scribbling on the wall. Nobody has

any clue about who wrote all this and what it means. I was going to tell you, but I never thought there was any connection between this and the excavated site. Do you think the murders and these scribblings are related somehow?' Rakesh asked.

Yadav was engrossed in studying the markings, comparing them with the ones he had seen on the site, but overheard Rakesh and asked casually, 'How were they murdered?'

'Death by strangulation. But no one saw any other person in the vehicle with the victims, no fingerprints, and most strangely, even though the car crashed, there was no drop of blood anywhere.'

Yadav took a moment to register what Kapoor had mentioned. Still, the plausibility or implausibility of the modus operandi of the murders prompted him to ask, 'So everybody died by strangulation and not a single drop of blood anywhere near the body? Were they robbed?'

'Yes,' Kapoor replied, 'but only jewellery. The murderer left a coin in each victim's fist. No paper money, laptop or mobile was stolen.'

Kapoor was on tenterhooks, waiting for a lead in the case and any link between the markings on the walls and the murders. The absurdity of it all compelled him to ask Yadav if he thought any link could be established.

'Do you know what is written here at the bottom?'

'I think it says, "Kill them both",' Yadav interpreted the script for him almost instantly, 'But I will have to send this to someone I know who is more familiar with the script.'

'Both—who both? Are they referring to Sher Singh and Roshan? Both have been missing?' Kapoor retorted.

'The names are not there,' Yadav replied. 'This language is called Ramasee, and it is a code language used by an eighteenth-century cult group, known as "Thugs".'

'But these Thugs you mention … They were there in the eighteenth century, right? So, what has that to do with our murders here?' Rakesh snapped.

'Thugs had an unusual way of killing people. Once they identified a target, they tracked him closely, and once the victim was on a deserted or empty stretch of land, they killed him. But they believed in strangulation with a roomal or scarf as the only way to kill. For them, shedding even a drop of blood was sacrilegious. That's the reason they were also called "Phansigar".'

Yadav's words confused both Rakesh and Kapoor. The connection between the markings and the murders appeared not only dubious and far-fetched, but also notional and without any evidence. The speculation unnerved Kapoor, but before he could respond to the contrived connection, a loud boom of firecrackers startled all of them.

'What was that?' Yadav asked, unsettled at the loud bang in the vicinity of the hospital.

'It's Dussehra today, so there must be some preparation going on at the Ramleela grounds for the evening ceremonies,' Kapoor replied.

'Dussehra!' exclaimed Yadav softly, as if recollecting something. 'Dussehra! Of course!' he exclaimed louder, and looked at Rakesh and Kapoor as if he had had an epiphany. Before Kapoor could ask anything, Yadav said, 'Kapoor sahab, can you take us to a mosque at Kutcha Tihar? I know the way. It is a small, nondescript place. Let's just go. I will tell you all about it on the way.'

Kapoor was perplexed but agreed to take him. Rakesh followed them.

Yadav and Rakesh sat on the rear seats of the police car, while Kapoor sat in the front, with Ram Singh on the wheel. Kapoor instructed Ram Singh to drive to Kutcha Tihar mosque and asked Yadav to give directions.

'I know the directions, sir ji. I am familiar with the area. Some of my extended family members live there,' said Ram Singh.

As they drove, Yadav began narrating the story of the Thugs.

'It's an urban legend today but the anecdotes of an inconspicuous cult notorious for its killings, lurking on Indian soil, can be traced to the thirteenth century, although modern history has its own version of them. These cults proliferated during the British empire in the early 1900s. The British administrators would often hear accounts of missing travellers or disappearances, but as the authenticity of these incidents could not be established, they were not officially documented until the discovery of a series of mass graves unearthed by the locals in different parts of the subcontinent. And whatever information was documented confirmed that the graves at all locations were identical, especially in their layout—a stockpile of dead bodies tossed one over the other. These murders were the work of a cult called 'Thugee', thought to be a social movement rooted in a religious system, worshippers of Goddess Kali.

'It was believed that the cult members were not just Hindus or Muslims but included members of other religious sects. They considered Goddess Kali to be their leader. This Kali had a completely different identity than what we know today. They believed this deity coveted human blood and sought sacrifices to satiate herself. The Thugee legend states that once upon a time, Kali fought a fervent battle with a demon whose blood was such that a new demon was created with every drop that fell on the ground. Consumed by the exhaustion of killing every new demon that spawned out of his blood, Kali created two humans, armed them with roomals, and instructed them to strangle the demons so that their blood

would not spill and there would be no new demons to kill. When they had killed the demons, Kali asked them to keep the roomals and use them to kill those who were not righteous. The Thugees were sworn to secrecy and used this modus operandi to kill. Some 40,000 deaths per year were ascribed to this cult in the early nineteenth century, although some impute that this number was upwards of 20,00,000. The total number is hard to determine because there were no formal records. And this way of killing corresponds to how your case victims have been killed, Kapoor sahab!' Yadav finished with a tone of certainty modulated by reference to the chronicle he had just narrated.

Kapoor could not fathom the eerie resemblance of the case at hand with the legend that Yadav was narrating and looked at Ram Singh, who seemed to be convinced that the two were in fact corresponding.

Kapoor wanted to free himself from the muddle he was in and snapped, 'But why are we going to Kutcha Tihar?'

Yadav ignored Kapoor's question and continued to narrate. 'It appears that the Thugs used to store their loot in the underground chambers of the sarai we just excavated. This route is probably what they used. It offered a perfect setting for them—outside the city and near the jungle. They could kill and bury the bodies anywhere they liked.'

Rakesh listened attentively to Yadav, trying to piece everything together but interjected, 'So now we know that the murderers are trying to imitate the ways of the Thugs. But this still does not explain why we are going to this mosque.'

Yadav added, 'I was about to come to that. The anecdotal evidence states that every year, on the day of Dussehra, the Thugs conglomerated at this mosque and held their initiation ceremony. We might find clues about whoever is trying to impersonate the Thugs.'

Ram Singh parked the car in an undistinguished unlit part of west Delhi alongside an intersection by the main road. From where they stood, the mosque's minaret was visible against the dark sky. Ram Singh asked a rickshaw-wala sleeping on the side of the road about the entrance to the mosque. The rickshaw-wala directed them to turn left into a narrow gully. As they walked into the gully, they saw a large, rugged iron gate that opened into a large courtyard, at the centre of which stood the main chamber of the mosque. While everyone took steps towards the main chamber, Ram Singh noticed a small room on the left of the courtyard and walked towards it. He knocked on the doors, and while waiting for a response, inspected the surroundings more as a habit of being in the police force than anything else. The door was opened by a maulvi, an old man clothed in a green cassock and white turban. Perturbed to see a police constable at the door, the maulvi gave a strained smile and said, '*Ji, janab, aap yahan kaise?'*

Kapoor took the opportunity to respond to the maulvi before Ram Singh could use his brusque police tone. 'Maulvi sahab, we wanted to talk to you about something. These are my colleagues—Yadav ji works for the ASI, Rakesh is a doctor, and Ram Singh is my subordinate. Can we come in and talk?'

'Ji, please come in. Can I get you some water?' the maulvi replied.

'No, thank you. This will not take long,' Kapoor responded. 'We just wanted to know if you have seen anything out of the ordinary at the mosque lately. Like unfamiliar people, people who might have raised some sort of suspicion. Anything unusual?'

The maulvi let out a sigh. It was apparent to Kapoor that the maulvi knew something.

'*O Khuda ka shukr hai* that you asked. I have been riddled with a puzzle for many days now, and I did not know who to talk to. The incident is so strange that no one would believe it. I am old now and at times, even I wonder if what I see is real or not.'

Kapoor, Yadav and Rakesh looked at each other and then at the maulvi. This was not the place they thought would lend any clues about the case at hand. 'Go ahead, Maulvi sahab. You have nothing to fear. Tell us everything in detail and do not leave out anything.' Kapoor asserted, intending to put the maulvi at ease.

'It was three weeks ago, I think. It was a typical day, just like other days. At night, I locked the main chamber after my post-dinner walk and went to sleep around ten, like I usually do. Around one at night, I heard some commotion. It was strange as no one else lives here besides me. I stepped out to see if there were people outside, but there was a thick fog, which was unusual for October. I could see a faint light coming from the main chamber of the mosque. Thinking someone was in the chamber, I stumbled my way through the fog to the chamber and unlocked the door to see if there was anyone, but I could not open it. It was as if there was some resistance from inside. I pressed my ear to the door to listen but could not hear anything clearly either. And just as I was about to turn around and call for help, the door relented. I pushed the door and stepped inside. There were at least a hundred coins, some silver and other brazen, along with white and yellow roomals on the floor. I had locked the mosque door myself and could not understand how anyone got inside. I picked up everything and kept it safely, thinking someone would come the next day to collect them. But no one has till now. Do you want to look at them? Has someone reached out to you or complained about missing coins?'

Kapoor, Yadav, and Rakesh looked at each other, startled at the maulvi's recount. Yadav whispered in Kapoor's ears, 'It appears to be the initiation ceremony of the Thugs.'

‘Can you show us the coins and the roomals, Maulvi sahab?’ Kapoor asked the maulvi.

‘Yes, please follow me,’ the maulvi stated, confounded at the incidents that had ambushed his life lately.

Kapoor inspected the main chamber of the mosque for other evidence but knew that the possibility of any viable evidence was non-existent. The maulvi handed over the coins and the roomals to Kapoor, and Yadav confirmed that the coins dated back to the eighteenth century.

‘The white and yellow roomals are thought to be Kali’s favourite colours, the colours in which she is usually clothed. The other coloured roomals are used for killings,’ Yadav retorted to the questioning look on Kapoor’s face.

Kapoor turned to the maulvi and said, ‘If you ever come across anything of this sort again, please call me immediately. Here is my number.’ Kapoor wrote his phone number on one of the pages of the pocket notebook he carried, tore it, and handed it over to the maulvi.

As they decided to leave, the maulvi inquired, ‘But who were those people, Inspector sahab?’

‘We don’t know, Maulvi sahab. We are investigating the case,’ Kapoor replied without looking at the maulvi’s face.

The drive back to the police station was long. It was midnight, and a pensive mood permeated the car. Kapoor kept recapitulating the maulvi’s words in his mind, looking for something that could stitch the pieces of the past with the present, replaying the maulvi’s experience on a loop.

‘This seems like it. Gathering in the mosque, the coins, and roomals, everything happening around Dussehra—all are indicative of the rituals that the Thugs followed,’ Yadav spoke in a serious vein.

Kapoor disregarded Yadav’s postulation and asked, ‘Do you want us to drop you home, Yadav sahab?’

‘If you don’t mind, can we go to Kalkaji temple?’ Yadav asked, impatience trickling from his tone. Kapoor scowled and glanced at Rakesh, who was visibly confused at the thought of stopping over at the temple.

As if reading their confusion, Yadav sighed and said, ‘I think we should meet the head priest of Kalkaji temple. I know him well. I will tell you why I want to meet him. The Thugs of Shahjahanabad considered this Kali Temple as their shrine. But there is one significant ritual they used to perform there. If we find the evidence for that, we can be a hundred per cent sure that it’s some gang that is impersonating the Thugs.’

‘What is this ritual you are talking about?’ Kapoor remarked, displeased at the way assumptions were being drawn by Yadav.

Before Yadav could respond, they were at the entrance of the Kalkaji temple’s market. Yadav, Rakesh and Kapoor got down from the car and started walking towards the temple shrine through the narrow market gully. The main shrine was in the centre of the courtyard at the end of the market. In stark contrast to the flower decorations on the temple exteriors on the night of Dussehra were the colourful pennant banners on multiple strings across the courtyard temple—one end tied to the exterior of the main shrine, and the other end to the slew of poles that stood around the courtyard.

Yadav observed the banners intently and walked as if looking for something in those strings. Puzzled at his actions, Kapoor and Rakesh followed him until Yadav bumped into Pundit Gauri Shankar, who was looking at the strings with the same keenness. Gauri Shankar was the head priest at the temple, a family lineage he was carrying on his shoulders now. His forefathers had managed the temple, and it was now his duty until his son took over.

‘Namashkar, Pundit ji! We were coming to meet you. But I thought you would have slept by now. What are you looking at up there?’ Yadav touched Pundit’s feet as a mark of respect.

‘May Maa Kali bless you. I am glad you came,’ Pundit ji said. ‘Do you see the colourful roomals in between the paper flags? Do you know what it means?’ he continued, pointing towards the strings with an apparent concern on his face.

Yadav looked at the strings and noticed the roomals alternating with the paper banners.

Pundit ji and Yadav looked at each other and, in an instant, both knew what it meant.

‘I have never seen this in my lifetime, and neither had my father. I have only read and heard about it through stories that ran in my family,’ Pundit ji added.

Kapoor and Rakesh were perplexed by the conversation between Yadav and Pundit ji.

‘Yadav sahab, what is going on? Can someone please explain what is going on? What are you and Pundit ji looking at, and why do you look worried?’ Kapoor exclaimed.

Yadav looked at Kapoor and said, ‘So these silk roomals that you see between the paper banners,’ pointing towards them, ‘do not belong to the temple. According to legends, roomals were put up by the Thugs here after they used them to strangle their victims. No one has seen them in decades.’

‘And all our victims have been strangled!’ Kapoor murmured. ‘The Thug theory is turning out to be convincing.’

‘Yes. But I do not understand. There have been four murders that we know of, but there are six roomals. There might be two more victims we are not aware of,’ Yadav said.

‘Sher Singh and Roshan?’ Rakesh blurted in an apologetic tone and looked at Kapoor’s face.

Kapoor informed Ram Singh of the new turn of events when they reached the parking lot. After listening to Kapoor, Ram Singh asked, ‘So what is the link to the morgue?’

The question was tenable but vexed Kapoor as he had no clear answer for it. The obscurity of the events and their obtuse connection with the legends and tales rattled Kapoor. He looked at Yadav and said, ‘I cannot wrap my head around one thing—why haven’t these people or Thugs attacked your people yet? I mean, you have blown the cover of what appears to be their hideaway, taken away their loot, and are in awfully close vicinity to them.’

‘Good question, Kapoor sahab. It is simple. The Thugs were sworn into not attacking the poor, labourers, women, and children. Like most self-proclaimed robin hoods, they also created rules that portrayed them as protectors of the poor.’

‘This might also explain why all the victims were robbed of jewellery. These were the only things that people carried in earlier times,’ Ram Singh blurted.

‘Kapoor sahab, what do we do now? How do you plan to catch them?’ asked Yadav.

Just as Kapoor was about to respond, his phone rang. It was his assistant from the Police Station.

‘Janab, we might have a breakthrough. I showed the pictures of the bags with coins, the new ones that the ASI people had found at the excavation site, to hospital orderlies who transported the dead bodies. One of the orderlies said that he saw Sher Singh, the retired medical examiner, with similar bags on many occasions. He used to keep them in the drawer of his office table.’

‘Have you made any progress in locating him?’ inquired Kapoor.

‘No, janab. No one has seen him or heard from him. He has no family and kept to himself. We sent out a team, but no one got any information.’

‘We must find him. Deploy some people outside his house and find out about the people he used to meet. Get in touch with the hospital staff and see if they know anything about his whereabouts. There is a possibility that he is dead. We need to find out if that is true or not.’

‘Ji, janab,’ the assistant disconnected the phone.

Kapoor informed Yadav and Rakesh of the breakthrough and the mystery that shrouded Sher Singh. He was determined to solve this case and had planned a hunt to nab the Thugs.

He walked up close to Ram Singh and said, 'We need to have these Thugs come to us instead of chasing after them. No one has seen them, neither Maulvi sahab nor Pundit ji, or anyone else. They might as well be at the morgue, in front of our eyes, planning the entire thing, and we would never know. There is only one way to get to the bottom of this. Listen carefully—today is Wednesday. From now till Saturday, I will be there around the morgue wearing jewellery and expensive watches, just like our victims. And on Saturday, I'll drive through the area where the murders took place. Hopefully, this gang will mark me as their next target, follow and attack me. And when they do, I will be ready to catch them.' Kapoor said, making it clear he was willing to be the head on a guillotine.

For the next couple of days, Kapoor walked around the morgue acting like a rich shopkeeper from Old Delhi, while Ram Singh spent the next few days meeting anyone and everyone who knew Sher Singh. Though they did not find anything about his whereabouts, the investigation revealed that his forefathers had long been inhabitants of the village where the hospital now stood.

But there was still no news about Roshan.

It was Saturday.

Kapoor had been at the morgue since morning, anticipating a faceoff with the Thugs. He examined every move, gesture, and general conduct of people entering or leaving the morgue, hoping to apprehend the criminals responsible for the murders, but could not find anyone fitting the criteria of a Thug or anyone acting suspiciously. Kapoor was later joined by Yadav, who was there to collect official documents about the excavation site.

At about four in the afternoon, the police station received a call informing them about an area behind Feroz Shah Kotla Fort giving out a strong stench of carrion. The police reached the site and found two dead bodies buried in a round pit. A coin over each eye. Ram Singh was informed of the site, who in turn called Kapoor and apprised him of the incident.

The phone call left Kapoor disappointed as he feared the bodies were of Roshan and Sher Singh. Looking at Kapoor's face, Yadav asked about the incident, to which Kapoor responded by giving details of the episode. Yadav's

face was bereft of colour. He said, ‘Kapoor sahab, this is how the Thugs used to bury their victims after killing them. In round pits and with coins over their eyes. I am certain that the bodies are of Roshan and Sher Singh.’

Kapoor instructed Ram to prepare the team for the plan. The plan was that at 10.30 at night, Kapoor would drive his car from Delhi Gate towards Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg via Shaheedi Park. One police van was to follow him, not in his view, but close enough to be on the trail. Ram Singh was to go to Sher Singh’s house to see if any other clues could supplement the investigation.

Late evening, Ram Singh was at Sher Singh’s house to look for clues that could give them some lead in the case. As he was about to leave, he noticed a small table turned upside down on the floor next to the kitchen door, with a notebook taped to the base. He removed the notebook and flipped through it but found its contents written in an unfamiliar script. He clicked a picture of a page and sent it to Yadav, asking him to see if he could translate it.

‘It’s written in Ramasee!’ Yadav screamed on the phone. ‘Why would Sher Singh write in Ramasee? Is he also a Thug? Is this note meant for Thugs? Looks like he is a part of the gang, and he had those bags in the drawer.’

‘Can you translate it?’ Ram Singh asked Yadav.

‘Yes, give me some time.’ Yadav took out a pen and a piece of paper and started to translate the script.

Kapoor walked up to his car in the hospital’s parking lot as planned but was slightly unnerved at the thought of this desperate attempt at nabbing the murderers proving unsuccessful. The car was parked under a banyan tree, oddly placed in the centre of the parking lot. He sat inside the car and instinctively looked in the rear-view mirror to ascertain if any other vehicle was pulling out behind him. No car was pulling out at this hour, but he felt someone’s presence on the rear seats. Dismissing it as his imagination, Kapoor opened the windows to breathe in the crisp, early November air in contrast to the warm, heavy interiors of the car. He looked in the rear-view mirror again. It was confirmed. He was alone.

Kapoor drove out of the parking lot.

Five minutes into the drive, he received a call from his assistant confirming that the dead bodies were of Sher Singh and Roshan, and the cause of death for both was strangulation.

'Bastards,' Kapoor screamed.

At Sher Singh's house, Ram Singh waited to receive Yadav's call but instead received a picture of the translated copy of the notebook on his phone from Yadav. Ram Singh read it aloud,

'*At this place, where the morgue stands today, once stood a sarai. The sarai was owned by my great-grandfather, Fateh Singh. This area, just outside the main city of Shahjahanabad, was infested by the Thugs. They threatened to kill Fateh Singh if he did not comply with them and started using the sarai for their nefarious activities. They used to befriend the travellers staying at the sarai, gauged the amount of gold, silver and horses they were carrying, and attached themselves to them. At a deserted spot during the journeys, they would attack the travelling party, strangle them to death using their roomals and bury the bodies. The leader of this gang was Thug Behram Singh. The cruellest and most dangerous of all the Thugs, he was believed to have murdered six hundred people in his lifetime. His killing prowess was different from the others. He had sewn a heavy golden medallion into his roomal and swung it in such a manner that the gold medallion hit the victim's throat. In one clean stroke, the victim was dead.*

Such was the terror of the Thugs that the British had to appoint Lord Skinner to put an end to them. My grandfather thought this was a perfect opportunity to get rid of the Thugs from his sarai. He became an informer for the British and helped them capture these criminals. Although Behram Singh escaped, four hundred of the gang members were caught and executed mercilessly by the British, and their bodies were buried around the sarai. Some say that a few of them were alive when they were buried.

Fateh Singh and the villagers thought that they had seen the last of the Thugs, but that was not the case. The Thugs had not crossed over to the other side, and soon, their rotting, infested apparitions unleashed their terror on the villagers, taking revenge on them for being informers. Khooni Darwaza had seen a lot of horrors, but never had it witnessed something like this. The villagers were terrorized and lived in fear. One Saturday, they kept a bag of jewellery and coins in the sarai and scribbled 'Maafi' in Ramasee on the walls to pacify the Thugs.

They did not see the ghosts after that day. The ghosts of the Thugs had accepted the offering.

Since then, Fateh Singh would keep a bag full of coins at the sarai every Saturday. After him, his son, my father, continued, and then, I inherited the responsibility. Time went on, villagers moved, the village became a town, and the town grew and was swallowed by the ever-growing Dilli. Since the hospital was

built on the land where the sarai was, I had to get a job in the hospital to fulfil the responsibility. I scribbled 'Maafi' in Ramasee on the wall of the morgue and continued to keep the bag full of coins and jewellery. But never once did I miss keeping the bag.

Until the day I retired.

I tried telling the Thugs that I would keep the bag at a different place, but week after week, they kept coming to the same place at the same time. On my last day, I placed my hand on Roshan's shoulder and said, 'Roshan, I am the guardian of a terrible secret. Just do as I tell you and keep a bag full of coins every Saturday between 1 and 1.30 a.m., and do not be in the morgue at that time. Even though the amount does not matter, the bag should appear heavy and full. Do not get curious, and do not try to get involved. There are things that you do not understand, and if I explained them to you, you will dismiss them as crazy. And for your safety, I do not want to tell you about it. If you want money, take it from me.'

Everything went as per plan for the first week, but then the next Saturday, I knew that Roshan did not keep the bag. I could sense the anger of the Thugs, hear their footsteps, and feel them coming towards me.

I see them, there they are. I see them coming. They have killed Roshan. They are coming for me. I am sorry, Roshan. I am sorry ...'

Ram Singh held the phone in his hand for some time as if his mind did not soak up the words he had just read. He snapped back from the haze he was in and yelled, 'Kapoor Sir!'

He dialled Kapoor's number but did not get a response. He called the police van that was trailing Kapoor and rushed out of Sher Singh's house.

They found Kapoor just a little ahead of Kotla. Not a drop of blood … jewellery missing and a coin in his fist.

From that day onwards, Rakesh decided to place a bag of coins at the morgue every Saturday.

The seventh roomal at the Kalkaji Mandir was the last one.

THE GATEKEEPER OF MEHRAULI

'Rajesh Bhai, please, let us have the ground-floor apartment. I have a small kid who would need the backyard to play in.' Anita was desperately trying to coax Rajesh, the property broker who was also the builder of the apartment building, to close the deal on Mayflower Villa apartments in a nondescript part of Mehrauli. Mehrauli, where the relics of antiquity stood erect—its minars, tombs, baolis, masjids and its graves. But Mehrauli was more than a piece of architectural history to Anita. The charm was in the affordability that came with it. But it was a place that she had promised to someone. It was the home she wanted.

'Madam, I told you, I have already taken *bayana* from someone for the apartment. They will close the deal in a day or two. I can show you other properties. See if they appeal to you!' Rajesh responded in a piqued tone. In property-related business, once you receive the *bayana*, the deal is closed there and then—but exceptions are always there or could be created. He had been in the business long enough to know who was desperate enough to shell out, bend down or stand tall, just about every time. And in Anita's case, he had already loaded the dice. At the end of the day, it was all about the money he would make on the deal. This was classic reverse psychology.

Just when Rajesh was about to disconnect, Anita sighed and said, 'Rajesh Bhai, I will give you 70 per cent cash and two more lakhs. You know nobody can match this offer. Let us close the deal.' Anita's counter was the result of the offensive in Rajesh's tactical gambit.

Rajesh gave a wry smile, which turned into a victory smirk as he glanced at the murtis of Laxmi and Ganesh kept to the right on his desk and thanked them in his heart.

'Anita ji, you have put me in a tough spot. Let me try convincing the other party. It's not about the money for me, but it seems your need is greater than theirs. Mushkil hai, but I will try. I will call you tomorrow.' Rajesh was already the winner.

He kept the phone down and slid comfortably into his oversized, faux-leather chair. The builder flats he had built over the old abandoned haveli were turning

out to be more profitable than he had anticipated. Sadat Manzil was what the haveli was known as a decade ago. But he had named it Mayflower Villa, at his son's suggestion. *Mayflower Villa by Rajesh Khurana and Sons*.

As he swivelled the chair, his reflection in the tall mirror on the wall to his left caught his eye. Rajesh chortled at his property management skills and felt like Don Fanucci. He wore a white shirt, white pants, white leather sandals, a gold-plated watch and had a gold tooth—in stark contrast to the money he took from the buyers, all in black. His sartorial choice was the unofficial uniform that property dealers or brokers in Delhi wore—an uncomplicated show of whiteness to camouflage the black money dealings and latent trickery.

Today, he had successfully closed all the contracts for the apartments at Mayflower complex. At least unofficially.

Anita looked at her two-year-old boy, Aryan, lovingly, but her eyes were suffused with desperation. She had brought him to Delhi from Oman after the death of Aditya, her husband; Aryan was just over a year old. It was time to give a fresh start to their lives. It was a promise she had made to someone. But getting back to Delhi had its own set of challenges. Her parents were no more, and the support system she had was negligible, but she had some distant relatives who lived on the outskirts of Mehrauli, though she hardly spoke to them. She managed to find a decent job in an architect's firm, and although the salary was not what she had expected, it was enough for both to get by decently. For the past six months, she had been actively looking out for an apartment in Mehrauli with the little money she had saved. She had been in talks with Rajesh since he started constructing Mayflower.

Anita was a thirty-year-old single mother, but the world treated her like a sixteen-year-old who required a character certificate, a thorough character investigation, questioning, moral policing and unwarranted guarding. She was now used to the constant comments that came with renting a place, almost like a gift with a purchase.

'We don't allow tenants to be late at night.'

'Don't you have a husband? You are so young and have a child. How will you pay the rent? Don't you have a male member in the family we can talk to?'

'We don't usually give houses to divorcees, but you have a child, so we did. Behave like a mother if you must live here.'

But Anita was not a divorcee. She was a widow. 'Was it the same thing?' she often questioned.

Aryan was Anita's only reason to live and although just four years old, the

anguish in their lives had matured him. Unlike other boys of his age, he rarely threw tantrums or demanded attention; he patiently listened to Anita when she wanted to vent.

Rajesh's response to her counter provided some relief to Anita. She knew in her heart that she would secure the apartment. She could not wait to move into her new home at Mayflower Villa.

'We are going to be home soon!' she muttered.

Aslam looked outside from his tiny cotton fluffing shop as labourers gave the final touches to the Mayflower Villa apartments. For him, that haveli was Sadat Manzil and would remain Sadat Manzil—a marvel of Persian architecture that was stripped of its grandeur by time, abandoned for more than half century, until recently, when Rajesh Khurana and Sons bought it and decided to gentrify it.

Aslam was now in his seventies. His skin was so wrinkled that everyone who looked at him thought he had been left in water for over a century. His pasty wrinkled appearance revealed more history than Sadat Manzil.

The man had spent his entire life in the shadows of the battered walls of the relic that Sadat Manzil had become; his shop was exactly opposite the haveli's entrance, and a thin gully separated the structures, along with their histories. Before him, his father ran the shop. He was one of the last remaining rui-pinjone-wale in Mehrauli, and now Aslam carried the family lineage. People would bring old mattresses and rajais to his shop to get new cotton fluffed into them. The work was satisfying; they were content with their ability to give warmth and comfort to their customers through cotton.

Hamid Mir and his family owned Sadat Manzil, and knew Aslam and his father. Mir's ancestors had built the haveli years ago and named it after Mir's great-grandfather, Sadat Mir, an erstwhile nawab. Hamid Mir and his family lived in the shadows of the nawabi title, desperately hanging on to the near-depleted battered opulence that his father and ancestors left. Hamid Mir occasionally asked Aslam to run errands for the family. And his excursions to the haveli involved getting tobacco for the hukkah or paiya jalebi for night-time dessert. Aslam became a part of the extended family of khidmatgaars, and a haveli explorer.

The haveli's outward height didn't do justice to the vast expanse of land it was built on; this was known only to those who had been inside the haveli and had seen its grounds that shared a boundary with Rajaon ki Baoli. The courtyard was at the centre, and the living quarters were built around it. The courtyard opened to terra firma, which housed a kitchen garden on its left. And then, there

was an outhouse with a basement. The Mir family had long used the outhouse for storage—unused beddings, antiques, furniture, old newspapers, records, and books. But Aslam could never figure out the way to the basement from the outhouse, which always intrigued him. He had cooked up many stories about the basement in his mind—from treasures to human bodies—Aslam's imagination and fixation with the basement knew no bounds.

The Mir family was like any other family in the neighbourhood. Kind and well respected. But then, to the surprise of many, including Aslam and his father, the Mirs moved out of the haveli suddenly without telling anyone, not even the khidmatgaars. The only news was that they had sold the haveli to some Syed Khan, an old, bearded man whose face was as wrinkled as a straightened-out crumpled piece of paper. The news spread like wildfire in the bazaar. Aslam had seen Syed Khan only once. He was sitting with Hamid Mir in the haveli and talking in hushed tones.

Syed Khan could be eighty years old; he could be one-hundred and eighty. No one could tell. He had neither family nor furniture, and once he closed the doors of the haveli—he did not open them again or step out to meet anyone for days at a stretch.

Why would someone like him buy such a large haveli? Aslam wondered about it often.

Rajesh handed over the property papers to Anita, along with the keys.

'Please change the locks, Anita ji,' Rajesh said as he walked towards the house with Anita and Aryan in tow.

'Both the first-floor and second-floor apartments are also booked and will be occupied in a day or two. So, you will have company. Everybody has a good background. They work in MNCs and travel to Gurgaon daily,' Rajesh said with an air of superiority. It was a huge feat for him to have sold the apartments to those who worked in MNCs. For the people of Rajesh's generation, working in 'MNCs' was the best certificate of character and education! *Good gentry,* as it is referred to in Delhi.

Anita was relieved and excited at the same time. The keys to the apartment gave her the independence she had been craving since she moved to Delhi. She decided to move in the next day. It was Sunday and Anita did not have to move much besides bedding, furniture and utensils. The apartment had two bedrooms built on 1,500 square feet. It was spacious. There was also a small room at the back where the outhouse once stood at Sadat Manzil. Since Anita had somewhat negotiated a flexible schedule with the firm she worked for, she decided to

convert that room into a study where she could work.

Over the next few days, the first- and second-floor neighbours also moved in. The first floor was bought by Rita and Som, a young couple in their thirties who worked in Gurgaon. They had been living in South Delhi on rent for the past few years and had been saving for a few years to buy an affordable house. Mehrauli was one of the few areas in South Delhi that were still remotely affordable. Plus, both were from Meerut, so owning a house in South Delhi, even if it was a builder's floor deep inside the lanes of Mehrauli, was a matter of great pride for their parents.

Neha and Sunil bought the second floor and moved in with their five-year-old daughter Sarah. Both worked at a five-star hotel in Saket and wanted something close by. Mehrauli was perfect for them; its location offered easy access and the cost offered sustainability.

Things were looking up for Anita.

From across the gully, Aslam watched Sadat Manzil coming to life again. It was now beaming with life and energy after fifty years. Mehrauli also changed with time, albeit slowly, compared to the rest of Delhi. Mehrauli was like a thali with an assortment of contrasting dishes put together in a non-aesthetic way. But it was strangely fulfilling to those who ate or lived in it.

Mehrauli's streets were now starting to mushroom with builder floors, in stark contrast to the old crumbling houses and havelis which were now stripped of their grandeur and magnificence. Most of the old havelis had been turned into builder floors as the apartment culture appealed more to the younger generation. Doodh-wali gully, known for its milkmen and cattle, fresh ghee and mithai, was now full of jewellery stores. The age-old tobacco and hukkah-selling shops that kept conversations alive at many chaupals of Mehrauli were now gone. Only the old banyan or peepal trees that gave shelter in the sweltering heat of summers were sacred enough to be spared. They stood as tall as they did fifty years ago. Mehrauli was a unique mix of scents and stench. The scent of modernity mixed with the funk of the narrow, busy gullies smelling of cow dung, Indian spices and hukkahs.

Aslam could never understand the wave of modernization. While most of his friends and acquaintances had died or moved out of Mehrauli with their families, a few remained with whom he often discussed the relics of the bygone era.

'Aslam Miyaan,' said Haroon as he took a puff from the hukkah pipe, 'Looks like Sadat Manzil is alive again. For the first time after what-was-that-old-man's-name turned Mehrauli upside down.' Haroon was Aslam's friend and as old as him.

'Syed,' murmured Aslam. 'Syed Khan.'

‘Yes, yes, Syed. But tell me, Aslam, did no one tell these people why the haveli was abandoned for so many years and nobody dared stay there?’

‘*Zamana badal gaya hai,* Haroon Miyaan. No one believes in the things we used to believe in,’ Aslam said and let out a sigh of dejection.

‘Djinns do not die, Aslam. They do not die like us. You know that.’

Aslam looked at Haroon with terror and perplexity in his eyes but remained quiet, lost in his thoughts.

The next few weeks were busy for the residents of Mayflower. Usual chit-chats between the residents increased, Aryan started to play with Sarah, and families bumped into each other either on their way back from or to work, or in the bazaar. A feeling of dependency grew between them. Mehrauli was a sub-city of Delhi that was self-sufficient. Everything was within reach. The furniture market, on the left of Adam Khan’s tomb, also known as Bhool-Bhulaiya, stocked all types of furniture people needed; the meat market next to the metro station catered to those looking to buy fresh meat of all kinds; the subzi mandi gave all the fresh produce and housed the wholesale market for all types of spices, pulses, and grains. Of course, one had to endure the cow dung stench, the frequent traffic jams of the narrow gullies, and juggling over open manholes, to enjoy all these perks. Loving and hating Mehrauli were two sides of the same coin.

A few weeks passed, and Aslam was privy to the lives of the Mayflower residents. After decades, Sadat Manzil was becoming the loving home it once was. He was beginning to relax but still wriggled in apprehension from time to time.

On a late Friday evening, as Aslam was closing his shop, a black cat at the entrance of Mayflower Apartments caught his attention. A shiver ran down his spine. He instinctively touched the taveez around his neck and started reciting Ayat al-Kursi under his breath. It was the same feeling he got the day Syed Khan opened the door for the first time after moving into Sadat Manzil.

Syed Khan lived alone at Sadat Manzil. No one ever saw his family, and he never interacted with or spoke to the neighbours, was never seen in the bazaars other than the meat market once in two weeks to buy quantities of lamb that did not justify his appetite or appearance, nor did anyone see any other soul entering the haveli. Although nobody had really seen the old man indulging in any out-of-the-ordinary activity, people often spoke about his ominous demeanour, which made many uncomfortable, adults and children alike.

It was only after he moved in that people started noticing unusual sightings and occurrences around the haveli and the adjoining area, specifically near

Rajaon ki Baoli. Dogs often growled at the plain walls of the haveli. A few had reported instances of people drowning in the dark waters of the baoli, while others claimed that the waters of the baoli were cursed and had a supernatural presence that waited to possess those who visited.

The pundits of the nearby Yogmaya temple were consulted, though such instances never ceased and continuously rattled the lives of the locals. While this almost became a part of life with time, the place gained notoriety, and many avoided these areas, especially at night.

Blissfully unaware of the history of the haveli, Som and Rita looked forward to the arrival of their baby. Rita was in her third trimester and had taken special permission from her employer to work from home. And since Anita worked from home, they spent their afternoons together. Rita was impressed by Aryan, and the way Anita had raised him. The boy never seemed to cry or cause any trouble. Even when Anita was working in her study at the back of the house, he would sit and play patiently in his room, waiting for Anita to finish her work. The only time she saw him crying was when Anita picked him up to take him to the study.

One late afternoon, Rita was browsing through a website for baby apparel to divert her mind off a minor altercation with a colleague she had been at loggerheads with on a project. Minutes into this, Rita heard a cat cry. Cats always made Rita uneasy. But there were no pet cats in the apartments, which made her think it must have been one of the strays. Rita went to the balcony to shoo it away but was startled to see the cat sitting at the balcony door and the mess it had made on the floor. Rita closed the door as quickly as she had opened it.

'What is that thing?' Rita exclaimed, trying to regain her composure.

The cat had no hair. It looked like a Sphynx cat, but scathed and burnt, and bellowing in pain, or fear, Rita could not make out. It hissed and spat hairballs covered in blood and bile.

Rita decided to close all the doors and sit inside until Som arrived to take care of the cat or until the cat left on its own. She closed the doors and windows, sat on the sofa, switched on the TV, and hoped that the TV's volume would trounce the cat's incessant wails. But she was suddenly fazed by an overpowering nauseating stink—the putrid smell of burning flesh, the kind that cremation grounds gave off—reminding the living of the dead burning away.

Rita decided to call Anita, and asked if she could come and sit with her until Som arrived.

A few minutes later, Anita entered the house with Aryan and immediately covered her nose.

‘What the hell is that?’ Anita was baffled.

‘That is what I am talking about,’ Rita replied. ‘Maybe the cat has dragged some dead rat or something. It is sitting in a pool of blood by the balcony door. I am too scared to open the door. Can you check?’

Anita opened the balcony door and almost lost her balance upon seeing the cat. But Anita did not see anything apart from the animal. *Maybe it is the cat itself that is stinking*, she thought.

The cat continued bellowing and did not move even when Anita tried to chase it away. But she was suddenly caught unawares by Rita’s retching.

‘Rita, there are no dead animals outside. Maybe it is the cat itself. It is a stray and looks like someone threw hot water on her, which burnt her badly. I will stay with you until Som comes back from work, if that makes you feel better.’

‘I would appreciate that, Anita.’ Rita heaved a sigh of relief. ‘Would Aryan like something to eat? There are chocolate eclairs from Wengers in the fridge.’

Both sat on the sofa and calmly waited for Som. It was almost six in the evening when the doorbell rang. It was Som. Not expecting Anita to open the door, Som was baffled.

‘Is everything okay? Where is Rita? Is she okay?’ Som asked.

‘Yes, everything is fine. Just something silly that scared her. Nothing to worry about,’ Anita said.

As Som settled down, Rita recounted the afternoon’s events to Som as he tried to establish the whereabouts of the stench and the cat. The stench had worsened. Som opened the balcony door to deal with the cat, but there was no sign of it.

‘It’s not here,’ Som declared as his exasperation escalated.

Anita was relieved by Som’s presence. She turned towards Rita and said, ‘I am going to go now. Let me know if you need anything.’

‘Thanks, Anita,’ Som responded while hugging Rita tightly. Rita was visibly calm in his presence but was rattled by the events.

‘I’ll heat the food. You go and change,’ said Rita dolefully, dismayed at the stench in the house.

As Rita placed the food in the microwave to heat, she heard Som shriek.

Rita’s heart skipped a beat. But before she took a step towards the living room to go to Som, she was taken aback: the cat was sitting by the kitchen door. Som was in the living room covering the gash that the cat had made on his right shoulder, just missing the neck. The cat had wriggled itself inside the apartment and pounced on an unsuspecting Som.

As Rita tried to compose herself, the cat leapt towards her. Rita squealed and struggled to maintain her balance but fell on the floor. She let out a cry of pain.

The cat looked at Rita and Som and ran towards the bedroom window it had likely come in through, and jumped out.

Som lunged towards Rita, realizing that she was lying unconscious on the kitchen floor. His trembling hands took the phone and called for an ambulance.

At the hospital, Som was apprised of the stillborn baby but was not prepared for what he saw. His own baby's dead body. Its head a pulpous mass, like an infected furuncle—no eyes, nose, or mouth. Som yelped as he fell into a chair, retching. The doctors offered sympathy but no explanation.

Aslam heard the news about Som and Anita from a customer. The reality of this incident brought to the fore the buried memories of incidents that had taken place fifty years ago, which Aslam was privy to. A few weeks after Syed's death, a family had come to live in the haveli. The first few months had been uneventful for the family. But as the days passed, the family would often talk about the mysterious incidents that kept happening in the haveli.

In the first few days of living in the haveli, the family could not lock any doors. When they could, the doors would fling open, often with a perfervid gush of cold air. Some inexplicable force assailed every room and corner of the haveli, and the temperatures almost always seemed unpredictable. It was like living in an electrically charged area. The family finally gave up when they found the remnants of their dead cat, burnt and scathed. That night, all family members had the same dream—their cat squealing as the fire burnt her black coat and scorched its skin, until it could no longer take the pain and died. It was the family's last night in the haveli. They realized that it was not their home: it was a place that had been invaded and overrun by the unearthly.

Aslam was doleful as he dwelled on the memories. Was it the same cat, he wondered.

As he sat on the living room sofa, Som recollected the events of the evening in the sequence they had occurred. His grief numbed him more than the exhaustion. Som did not realize when he went into a deep slumber and woke up to a baby's whimpering. As he opened his eyes, he saw the cat, with a mauled human baby's head hanging from its mouth—a pulpous mass, just like Som's newborn.

Som felt sickened at the revolting sight before him. His gut told him to get out of the cat's way. He lifted his bereft body on to his feet, leapt out of the door, and ran down to Sunil's apartment. He intuitively knew that this was not just an

animal. It was something more sinister!

He banged on Neha and Sunil's apartment door to warn them. But he didn't need to—the cat had dropped the pulpous mass on their five-year-old daughter, Sarah, playing in the balcony. Sarah was inconsolable as Neha and Sunil tried to pacify her. Drenched in blood and, in complete shock, Sarah could not open her eyes for fear of looking at the mangled head staring at her. Sickened by the sight, Neha took Sarah inside, while Sunil tried to probe the butchered piece of flesh in front of him.

Neha opened the door to a bedraggled and hysterical Som. Som tried to explain the events as Neha and Sunil tried to understand his agitation. 'There must be a reason for what is happening,' Sunil reasoned while trying to find some logic. He stepped out to clear his head but saw Aslam approaching the gate.

'Sunil Sir, I think you all should leave the house immediately. I should have said something earlier, but I thought it was over.'

'Said what? What was over?' asked Sunil, perturbed by the circumstances and irked at Aslam's reluctance to give more information. 'Aslam, this is not the time for puzzles. Tell me what you know.'

Aslam told everything about Sadat Manzil, the old man Syed Khan, and the experiences of the family that had resided in the house after Syed died.

'What happened after the family left?' Sunil questioned.

'The family's daunting experience caught the attention of locals, who called the Pir of Nizamuddin Dargah. I was there to guide him as I knew the haveli well. He investigated every nook and cranny of the haveli but could not find anything unusual or out of the ordinary until he reached the outhouse, the room at the back of the house, which had a basement but without an entry. All it had was a peculiar, odd-shaped lattice about five feet in length in the ground. The Pir wanted to see if this led to something and found the entrance to the basement tucked away in the kitchen. Even I could not figure this out. But the room had two oval-shaped mirrors that hung on walls opposite to each other, placed in a way that each reflected the other. And this was the root of everything that was happening in the haveli. It was a moment of realization for the Pir too. He told me that the room housed a portal—the mirrors were a gateway to the 'other' world—used by spirits, djinn and shaitans to travel across the physical realm.

The Pir broke the mirrors and hammered three-point chisels in their place. These chisels had a crescent and a star on their tops and were blessed at the Nizamuddin Dargah. It is known that djinns do not venture into places where these are mounted. And while these nails remained in place, the haveli was protected. With the help of a few people, the entire basement was filled with concrete so that no one could go there.'

Aslam continued, ‘All these years, no unworldly incident occurred. Until now. I am certain that the nails have been removed. Please leave as soon as you can. There are no more Pirs who can take on these powerful entities. There is nothing more I can say or do.’ Aslam walked away reciting the Quran’s Sura.

It was sombre inside Sunil’s apartment. He slammed the door behind him as he entered and said, ‘That bastard Rajesh, I am sure he has something to do with this. I will not leave him; he will have to pay back every penny.’ While Sunil fumed with agony, Som, Neha and Anita sat stone-faced, exasperated at the series of events. ‘We cannot stay in this house. Aslam told me the history of this place, and all I can say is that we will have to go from here. I will get the important things, and we will drive to my parents’ house in Meerut. Anita, you and Aryan can stay with us till you figure out where to stay. Now go and quickly pack,’ Sunil said.

In an hour, Sunil and Neha packed whatever they could and dumped the bags in the car, then called for Anita.

Anita came out of her apartment and reluctantly said, ‘You guys go ahead. I have nowhere to go. This is my home.’

Sunil tried to convince Anita to accompany them, but Anita was adamant.

‘Call me if you change your mind,’ said Sunil as he sat in his car, dismayed at the turn of events.

As they left, Anita went inside the house and sat on the sofa, trying to grasp the reality of the situation and the thought of losing the only home she had ever had. Aryan hugged her. His commiserating embrace prompted her to give voice to what she could never say out loud.

‘I will never leave this place. This is the only place I can call home. I feel safe here. I do not have to suffer any more. Not my father’s hatred, nor my husband’s animosity. People have used and abused me. I have suffered enough. I know you will not treat me like this, Aryan. I know you will not give me the pain that Aditya gave me. I know you will never treat any woman the way Aditya treated me.’

Aryan felt secure in Anita’s embrace and patiently consoled her as she continued to reflect on her past, their past.

‘There is no upper limit to man’s cruelty. They compete to see who can be crueller, hit harder, cut deeper. Aditya turned me into a prostitute for his clients. He threatened to burn me if I ever mentioned it to anyone. I was raped every day, and he pushed me down the stairs when I got pregnant. All I know is that I woke up in the hospital two days later. We survived. You saved me, Aryan.’

Anita released her embrace and looked at Aryan’s face. His green eyes were set on Anita. Aryan touched Anita’s face and announced, ‘It is time. Open the

Majlis al Jinn.' Aryan's voice was not his. It was Suleiman's. The Djinn. Suleiman had taken over Aryan's body to travel the realms.

Anita was still reliving the moment when she lay unconscious in a stupor after Aditya had pushed her down the stairs. In her dream, Anita was holding a dead baby, standing in Majlis al Jinn, the caves of the djinns. The caves were the meeting point of spirits and had three entrances that were created when a djinn fired three lightning bolts, causing the earth to fracture. The djinns travelled through the realms into the earth through these entrances. It was Suleiman, the djinn, who had told Anita that he could end her suffering, punish all those who had tortured her and infuse life in her dead baby. In return, he wanted two things.

When Anita regained consciousness, she reluctantly asked for Aditya. But she was told that he was dead. Suleiman had honoured his end of the deal. Anita was finally free of her husband. It was now Anita's turn to fulfil the promise she had made. She had already fulfilled the first one—to allow Suleiman to take over Aryan's body to travel in this world. It was time for the second promise to be delivered.

Anita picked up the mirrors that she had carried with her from Oman and went down to the basement. She had spent the last month digging the floor of the study to remove the chisels. It was time for her to mount the mirrors on the opposite walls of the study. The mirrors were placed in a way that each reflected the other. These were the gateways to the 'other' world.

The Majlis al Jinn was ready.

Within moments, the djinns started coming through the portal—flying around Anita as she stood tall, without fear, commanding their respect. No one could hurt her now.

She was the new gatekeeper of Mehrauli.

OLD DELHI TO ANYWHERE

It was almost 10.30 at night. '*Aaj dhundh bahut hai,*' said Chaurasia, as he offered Classic Milds to Rishabh. Rishab was one of the last ones to leave Chaurasia's Paan Bhandaar. He often helped Chaurasia with closing the shutters, more out of respect for Chaurasia's age than anything else.

Rishabh liked to roam the streets of Old Delhi just as it was shutting down at night. Ratan Chaurasia, a seventy-year-old, had been selling paan, cigarettes and everything related to them for much of his life on Ansari Road near the Dayanand Marg intersection in Daryaganj. His well-oiled salt-and-pepper hair gave the impression of a life lived long enough to see the black, white, and greys of the world. A long tuft of hair hung from the top of his head and was loosely tied in a knot at the end, which reminded Rishabh of the last vestiges of an orthodox upbringing in stark contrast to his scarlet lips that symbolized everything divergent. His stomach hung from his otherwise stout frame that was always covered by a dhoti and a kurta. Chaurasia was the quintessential paan-wala—podgy, jaded, blasé.

'*Aap har sardi ki raat yahi bolte ho*,' Rishabh replied with a smile. He knew why Ratan said it. Ratan liked predictability, which was comforting to him and propelled him to brace for the next day. Rishabh took a drag and let out the smoke, which blended in with the thick wintery fog that had just started to descend on the street. He looked around and saw most of the street-side thelas and kiosks shut down. Chaurasia's was the last one. Rishabh enjoyed spending time on the streets of Delhi, especially at night when a strange, comforting calmness abated the day's busyness. But it was Delhi that he was in love with. Rishabh's column in the magazine, Delhi Noir, captured the character of Delhi that no one was aware of—a hidden cabalistic identity that sprung from a history made by many. Delhi, a tale of seven cities, was not just seven any more. These days, it depended on whom you asked. There is the powerful Delhi of Lutyens'; the rich Delhi of Panchsheel; South Delhi, for those who believe the boundaries of Delhi start at Dhaula Kuan and end at Lajpat Nagar; Bengali Delhi of CR Park; Punjabi Delhi of Punjabi Bagh; rich Kashmiri Delhi of Pamposh Enclave and the struggling Kashmiri Delhi of INA; Afghani Delhi of Lajpat Nagar and

African Delhi of Khirki Extension; the 'Dilli' of Old Delhi and 'Dehli' of Mehrauli. And, of course, East Delhi, trying to convince the rest of the city that it is indeed Delhi, and not Ghaziabad or Noida.

And then there is a Delhi that wakes up in the dead of night and engulfs all the other Delhis under a cloak of darkness—where the homeless occupy the hollow spaces under the flyovers, poor migrants eat the same paranthas of AIIMS or Moolchand as the rich kids coming out of swanky clubs do, where the women are still unsafe, and men privileged just by virtue of being men. A privilege most relished by Rishabh, but with guilt.

Rishabh was out on the streets of Old Delhi most nights, looking for stories for his weekly column. His nightly sojourns had allowed him to be featured in a prestigious magazine, so he was getting paid for something he loved doing. On many days, he would travel the length and breadth of Delhi, sampling the best food that the city had to offer at night while listening to stories of the night revellers. Rishabh never got bored of stories told by the paranthe-wala of Moolchand about how Shahrukh Khan loved eating there during his college days. He did not care about the authenticity of stories when he was listening to them over anda-parantha, achar and chai—because this is what made Delhi, Delhi.

Many times, he would take the call-centre cabs to JNU, where he would bombard his appetite with cuisines that were as varied as the demographic profiles of students at JNU. On some days, he would go for a little piece of the northeast at the Northeast Dhabha for its momos, thukpa, tenga, akhuni, raja mirchi or chili mushroom. On days when he felt rich, physically and mentally, he would go to Mughal Darbar for its Afghani chicken and sheermal, and listen to the ideological debates of JNU students. However, he never took any of them seriously because he knew that while some stuck to their ideologies for life, others were willing to give them up for a pack of choti Gold Flake and a quarter of an old monk.

But tonight, Rishabh was out for a serious matter. He was out to meet his old friends to do a story on the alternate sleep economy that was flourishing on the streets of Delhi. An ever-increasing migrant population, combined with not enough shelters, had given rise to middlemen who provided homeless people end-to-end service to sleep on the pavements for a price. This included blankets on rent and protection from the policemen, street sweepers and local pickpockets —the cost of this service, Rs 20 per night.

Just after Chaurasia shut his Paan Bhandaar and went about his way on his bicycle, Rishabh walked across the road to talk to Shyam, one of the migrant workers who slept on the pavement outside a chicken-fry shop.

'Why don't you just buy the blankets once rather than pay for them daily?

That would be much cheaper,' Rishabh remarked, after Shyam handed over the money to one of the middlemen who had given him the bedding and other things.

'Because we have nowhere to store them. Earlier, we used to keep them on the trees, but they were stolen from there. So, this is a much better arrangement,' Shyam replied as he unfolded his bedding and sat on it, asking Rishabh to sit with him.

'And can you rent this from anyone?' Rishabh retorted as he sat with Shyam and pointed to the group of people circulating the blankets.

'Oh no, that will cause unnecessary fights. The area is divided among the middlemen. That Kallu is in charge here,' Shyam informed as he pointed his finger towards a man in his fifties. 'He manages this area. We all have fixed areas to sleep in. He also ensures that nobody encroaches on our space. It may not seem like it, but it's a well-oiled machine.'

A machine that was the outcome of the government's apathy towards a large portion of the population that migrated to Delhi to work and survived on the streets. Data reveals that every year, the police collects more than 3,000 unidentifiable bodies from the streets, most of whom die due to prolonged exposure to Delhi's extreme cold and heat.

Ever since Rishabh uncovered the plight of the migrant workers in the magazine's feature story last year, he felt a pang of guilt every time he snuggled in his bed at night. He had resolved to be a part of the lives of the migrants as much as possible. He chatted with them often, like tonight, listening to people as they shared their stories and helping a few like Sandesh, a migrant worker from Bihar who had borrowed money from Rishabh for blankets for his two children. For Rishabh, it was not charity. They always returned the money, sooner or later, unlike the rich few who forgot the sanctity of promises and kept looking for ways to avoid paying. Most poor people just asked for more time to pay it back.

After chatting with Shyam about his family back home, Rishabh went to Kallu, the blanket mafia member who managed the pavement Shyam slept on. Kallu and Rishabh had exchanged glances with each other many times before, and both were aware of each other's presence on the streets. Kallu knew Rishabh helped the homeless occasionally if they were in need but had never spoken to him, while Rishabh knew that Kallu was a blanket mafia member. They never tried to know each other beyond the occasional head nod, suggesting acknowledgement of the other's presence. But tonight, Rishabh wanted to know more.

'Kallu, is anyone facing a problem with payments these days?' Rishabh inquired.

'*Teen log hai*. They were not able to get a daily wage. I will not be able to

give them the blankets if they do not pay soon,' Kallu informed Rishabh.

'Here, keep this,' said Rishabh as he handed over a hundred rupee note to Kallu, 'Just make sure no one is without the bedding. I will pay for the next month on their behalf tomorrow.'

Kallu nodded in affirmation but appeared confounded at Rishabh's inclination to support the homeless.

Rishabh looked at his watch and waved at Shyam, indicating it was time for Rishabh to leave. He walked up to the main road for a call centre cab that would drop him home at Kailash Colony. Rishabh did not drive at night since he did not want the parking hassles of Old Delhi, nor did he want his affluence to show in his interactions with people, especially the homeless like Shyam or the mafia like Kallu. The call centre cab drivers took Rs 10 to Rs 40, depending on which part of the city they were driving to, which was mostly Gurgaon or Noida. Besides, the drivers always had stories to tell and knew the best places to eat in Delhi at midnight.

But tonight, there were no cabs on the roads. It was half past midnight. Rishabh had been standing at the intersection for more than thirty minutes without any cab stopping by. He decided to ask for a lift from the next car or pillion that went by, but moments later, he saw a DTC bus coming down the road. It was bus number 425, which had a 'No Service' board on its windshield. DTC buses usually plied 'No Service' buses late in the night when they were going from one bus depot to another for repairs or when the buses were done with their routes for the day. It was not unusual for DTC buses to be on the roads at this hour. Rishabh had taken out-of-service DTC buses many times in the past and decided to wave his hand, signalling it to stop. The bus passed Rishabh but halted a few metres ahead of him. Rishabh ran towards the bus and boarded it from the rear.

From the back of the bus, Rishabh looked over the seats and saw the driver, his helper—a teenager who sat behind him—and two other people sitting on the second seat from the front—a woman and a girl, probably her daughter, Rishabh thought to himself. He was somehow relieved at the presence of two more passengers just like him who could not find any other mode of transportation.

'Shukriya,' Rishabh shouted. '*Ye bus kahan tak jayegi?'*

'Bhogal. Where do you have to go?' the driver asked without looking in the rear-view mirror.

'Kailash Colony. But you can drop me at Nizamuddin or anywhere near it? How much will you take?' Rishabh asked.

'I am new to the route. Can you tell me the way to Bhogal from here? I don't need any money,' the driver added.

‘Ji. I can tell you. At this hour, it will take about thirty minutes,’ Rishabh replied and started giving directions to the driver.

A few minutes had passed, and the oppressive silence in the bus made Rishabh uncomfortable, for he was used to chatting with cab drivers at night. He decided to break the ice and initiate a conversation.

‘Are you from Purani Dilli?’ Rishabh asked, still sitting at the back of the bus and giving directions.

‘Yes, Ballimaran. I was born and brought up there,’ the driver replied.

‘Ah, so you are Ghalib’s neighbour,’ Rishabh said with a smile.

‘Yes, you can say that.’

‘We have a long way to go. Why don’t you tell us some stories of Purani Dilli? Some secrets that many may not know.’

‘Stories? What kind of stories?

‘Um … anything interesting. Oh yes. I know. How about some bhoot–djinn stories of Old Delhi? It is the perfect setting. Delhi winter, deserted roads and, if you don’t mind me saying, a spooky DTC bus.’

‘Do you believe in ghosts?’ the driver asked Rishabh.

‘I don’t know. I have heard enough anecdotes that I should believe in them, but I have never experienced it myself despite being out every night at every possible corner of Delhi. What about you? Have you?

‘Well, I didn’t either but let me share something with you, and then you can tell me if you think ghosts exist,’ the driver mumbled.

Rishabh sat up straight and was ready to listen. *This is going to be a fun night*, Rishabh thought to himself.

‘Okay. So here is the first one for the night,’ the driver said. ‘For the last twenty years, every Friday, I am the one who makes mutton for family dinner. And we like to have it with sheermal, which I get from Riyaz Bhai’s bakery. The bakery is at the corner of gully number ten in Ballimaran, about fifteen minutes walking distance from my house. I’ve known Riyaz Bhai for over twenty years; he was my friend, and his bakery was one of the oldest bakeries in the city, most famous for sheermal. He used to pay special attention to my order and had the sheermal in tandoor by the time I arrived at the bakery. When we met, we had the usual chit-chat—who opened a new shop, who got married, kids, how the business was overall. And by the time our chat ended, sheermal was almost always done. He would pack it in a newspaper, and I would be on my way. And on my way back, I would stop at the paan-wala next to his bakery and pick up two kimam-wale paan. This was the routine I followed every Friday for the last twenty years unless I was sick or out of Delhi.’ The driver paused and asked Rishabh, ‘Do you eat mutton?’

Rishabh answered almost in an instant, 'Of course, I do.'

'Good. I hope you know one never eats parantha or ghee-wali roti with mutton. Plain roti without ghee or sheermal works best with it.' The driver imparted his culinary wisdom and continued with the narration: 'So, it was a Friday, and I still remember the events of the day like they happened yesterday. It was the day of Phool Walon Ki Sair in Mehrauli, and I reached home late that evening. I did not have the time to cook mutton and decided to pick it from Sardar Ji Meat-Wale in Sadar Bazar. If I have ever had to eat mutton from a shop, I always got it from Sardar ji's. Have you ever eaten there?' the driver asked Rishabh.

'No, I have not. I will make sure that I do,' Rishabh said, making a mental note of the place.

The driver continued with the story. 'After I picked up the mutton, I went to Riyaz Bhai's bakery to buy sheermal, but it was closed. That was out of the ordinary because I had not seen the bakery closed in two decades. If Riyaz Bhai was not around, one of his brothers would open it. They lived in the same gully —all five brothers—so there was always someone to open the bakery. Eid, Muharram, Diwali, Holi—the bakery was always open. But I didn't think much of it then, because I knew Riyaz Bhai was not in Delhi. He had to go to his *sasural* in Muzaffarpur. I thought maybe that week, the entire family had to go for some reason. I bought sheermal from another bakery and decided to go to Riyaz Bhai's house, which was close to his shop, to find out if everything was fine.

It must have been around 9 p.m. when I reached Riyaz Bhai's house and found the main door unlocked. I knocked on the door but heard a woman's wails and cries coming from inside. As I opened the door to inquire what had happened, someone from the other side of the gully shouted at me, 'Go back, go back, don't go there.' I didn't understand why someone would say such a thing; this was unlike Purani Dilli. We take care of our own here, you know. I turned around to see who called out to me but saw a few neighbours hurriedly closing their doors. I ignored them and whoever had said those words to me. Riyaz was my friend, and I had to find out what was happening inside. I stepped inside the house and called out to him but got no response. I looked around to see if someone from his family was around, but all the doors were closed. But I could hear the wails coming from the room in front of me. I ran towards the door and tried to open it, but it was locked too. I banged my fists on the door and called out for someone to open, but the louder and more impatient I got, the louder the wails became. By this time, I was frantically looking around for a window to see if I could see what was happening inside. But there were none. I peeped into the

room from the small gap between the two-panelled old wooden door that I was leaning on and will never forget what I saw.'

'What? What did you see?' Rishabh asked impatiently.

'Riyaz's daughter was floating in the air, levitating in a foetal position, as if someone were cradling her mid-air. I did not see anyone else around. The furniture in the house was moving on its own. The chairs whirled on their own. I saw a table move towards the door, but no one pushing it. I stepped back as the table was thwacked on the door. Everything was happening so fast, and I could not understand what I was witnessing. Between all this wailing and the moving furniture, I heard Riyaz crying and calling out to his wife, '*Zeenat, Zeenat, Zeenat*'. I shouted to Riyaz, telling him it was me, but he did not respond. And the strange part was that despite all that was happening, Riyaz's daughter was still in the air when I peeped inside again. I decided to call someone and stepped away from the door, but as I turned away, the wailing stopped. I rushed towards the door again and peeped inside to see Riyaz holding his daughter in his arms like a baby, as if she was not aware of anything happening to or around her. I called out to Riyaz again, but he didn't answer me or open the door.

'I decided to go home but looked around to see if someone was willing to tell me about all that was happening in Riyaz's home. A neighbour opened his window and shouted, "It's his wife."

'''Excuse me?" I asked, a little disorientated by what I had just witnessed.

'''The whole family had gone to Muzaffarpur. I heard that the robbers attacked them one night. Since then, every night, the wife cries like this and holds the daughter in her arms, and refuses to let her go. She starts doing this every night around the same time they were attacked," said the neighbour.

'''But I could not see her anywhere in the house. Was she inside? Is she hurt?"

'''She was killed by the robbers," the neighbour said.'

'Oh God!' Rishabh exclaimed, 'What happened to Riyaz and his daughter?'

'Well, that night I left Riyaz's house and, a week later, went for Haj. When I returned, I went to his bakery, where his brother told me that after the death of his wife, Riyaz or his daughter were not seen interacting with anyone. His brothers used to visit them, but they too stopped after Riyaz asked them not to visit. But when one of the brothers visited Riyaz for a bakery-related matter a week later, he found the doors locked. They thought Riyaz had left for Muzaffarpur with his daughter to visit his wife's grave. But after a few weeks of trying to contact Riyaz, his brothers decided to call the police to investigate. When the police broke open the door to Riyaz's room, they found Riyaz and his daughter dead. No possible cause of death was ascertained. The neighbours told

the police that they heard someone wailing from inside the house every night between nine and ten. One of the neighbours said that he used to see Riyaz's wife's ghost every night entering the door and leaving about an hour later or so. But one night, she never left. Or she left and took away her family with her.'

Rishabh realized that they had reached Nizamuddin. He asked the driver to pull over and told him about the way to Bhogal. Before leaving the bus, Rishabh walked up to the front of the bus and said, 'Thank you for the story. I hope we meet again, and I get to listen to more stories.'

The next evening, Rishabh was back in Old Delhi. After his usual recce of a few uncharted territories in the area, he went to Chaurasia's to have a cigarette and then met Shyam. After his chit-chat with Shyam and others, he went up to Kallu and, as promised, paid him on behalf of Hari, Monu and Bhola. In some time, Rishabh was back at the intersection looking for a cab to drop him home. To his luck, he saw another DTC bus. He waived at the bus. As the bus got closer, Rishabh noticed it was the same bus he had boarded the night before—bus number 425 with a 'No Service' board against the windshield, with the same driver and helper. The bus came to a halt a few metres away from where Rishabh stood. Rishabh ran and boarded the bus from the rear door. He looked over the seats and found the same people on the bus—a woman and her daughter.

'Well, hello again,' Rishabh greeted them. 'This is such a coincidence. But today I will pay. How much?'

'No. It is fine. I need to go to Mayur Vihar Phase II today. Can you tell me the way? You see, I have spent most of my life cocooned in Old Delhi, and I do not know many of the routes. I can drop you in the middle somewhere,' the driver remarked. Nobody looked in Rishabh's direction nor said a word.

'Yes, of course, no problem. I can get down near Akshardham and get a cab from there,' Rishabh replied.

Rishabh sat on one of the rear seats, just as before, and gave directions while thinking about the woman and her daughter. He noticed that both were dressed in the same clothes as the day before but was unsure. He had not paid attention to anything last night on the bus. Although something seemed off about them, Rishabh dismissed the feeling.

And just like yesterday, it was Rishabh who broke the silence.

'Do you have another story to tell us?' Rishabh asked the driver.

But before the driver could say anything, the woman spoke.

'I have one story to tell if you want to hear.'

'Of course, that will be great!' Rishabh replied fervently.

The woman looked out of the window and spoke: ‘We knew our next-door neighbours, Mr and Mrs Shukla, for fifteen years. They moved in a month after my oldest son was born. They were a childless couple. Both were in their early fifties and doted on my son, Kashif. He practically grew up in their house. They were like family.

‘A few years later, Shukla Aunty fell from a rickshaw and hit her head. After many days of struggling in the hospital, she passed away. Shukla Uncle went into a depression, and the entire gully took turns taking care of him, and nursed him back to health. We all had adopted him, you could say. Some were responsible for getting him breakfast, others for his lunch or dinner. The local chemist shop made sure that medicines were delivered to him on time. My son, Kashif, made sure he, along with other kids, met him daily, so he always had company in the evenings. But unfortunately, a year ago, Uncle was diagnosed with cancer. Again, the neighbours came together and ensured that he was provided with the best treatment. But he was clearly in pain and, especially after the chemo sessions, the depression came back. He had no will to live and often spoke about committing suicide. We did the best that we could, but clearly, he was ready to give it all up.

‘But then one night, Kashif came and woke me up. He had tears in his eyes, and he said, ‘Ammi, I think Uncle is dead.’

‘I was shocked and thought maybe he had had a bad dream. I told him to go back to sleep. But Kashif insisted that I check on Shukla Uncle. I had the keys to his house and went to see if he was fine but found him lying in a corner of the living room. Shukla Uncle was dead. I called up the hospital and the police, along with a few neighbours. No one was sure if there were any other relatives we needed to inform, so I started going through his drawers to see if I could get details of any relatives, lawyers or maybe a will.

‘I could not find anything that looked like a will, but I did find something else. One of the drawers of his bedside table was full of old, black-and-white photographs of a girl. In many pictures, she was laughing and playing with Uncle and Aunty. There were some other documents as well, so I decided to take a few photographs and documents with me, hoping to find details of some relatives that I could inform.

‘When the ambulance took his body away, I returned home with the papers and photographs, and found Kashif sitting in his room, visibly disturbed. I went up to him and said, “Kashif, my dear, Shukla Uncle is dead. I know this is upsetting but know that he is free from pain and is in a better place with Aunty. He lived a long and beautiful life, and you should be thankful that you spent so many years with such a beautiful soul.”

‘Kashif nodded and said, “I know.”

‘‘‘But I did not ask you, how did you know that Shukla Uncle had passed away?”

‘He hesitated for a minute and said, “I don’t know if you will believe this, but it happened, Ammi. I know no one will believe me, but it did happen.”

‘‘‘I will always believe you, Kashif. Always. Now tell me what happened.”

‘‘‘When I was sleeping I was sleeping, I felt someone tugging at my leg, trying to wake me up. At first, I thought it was you or Asifa, so I just turned the side and ignored it. But it did not stop. I opened my eyes. But I saw something, and I shut my eyes again.”’

‘‘‘What did you see?”

‘‘‘There was a girl. She must have been five or six years old, sitting at the edge of my bed, tugging at my pyjama. She was wearing a blue frock and had short hair. I got so scared, Ammi, but then I gathered my courage and asked her who she was and where she came from. But she paid no attention to my questions. She just kept looking at me without blinking an eyelid. I noticed it, Ammi, she did not blink even once. But after a few minutes, she thanked me for taking care of her father and told me that she would now take him with her. And then she just vanished. She was gone from the room. Although she did not mention Shukla Uncle, I knew she was talking about him.”’

‘I did not know how but I felt that it was the same girl from the photographs I got from Shukla Uncle’s bedside table. I showed Kashif the picture of the girl that I found in the drawer. Kashif confirmed it was her. The little girl was Neha, the daughter of Mr and Mrs Shukla. She had passed away due to a rare form of blood cancer when she was only five,’ the woman finished.

Rishabh was so engrossed in the story that he did not realize that they were almost near Akshardham Mandir. He got up from his seat and walked up to the woman. ‘I am sorry, I need to get down now. Your story was terrifying and sad at the same time. I hope the family was united in heaven,’ he said dolefully.

He went to the driver in the front and gave him directions to Mayur Vihar Phase II. And although no one responded, he said his goodbyes to everyone on the bus and got down.

The next night, Rishabh was back at Chaurasia’s. After a while, he caught up with his ‘sleeper’ friends and made sure everyone was doing fine through his usual chit-chat with them. Tonight, Rishabh had no specific reason to be there. He had finished writing the new column he was working on. It was on Raj Ghat and the associated memorials like the Shanti Van—the forgotten areas of

reverence. The only reason he was out tonight was to get on the same bus and listen to a few more stories or anecdotes. But tonight, Rishabh felt under the weather and decided to go home early. He was at the intersection looking for a cab a bit earlier than usual and was certain he would not get the bus. But to his surprise, he saw the bus heading in his direction. Rishabh waved excitedly at the bus. The bus stopped a few feet away from him, but as soon as he boarded the bus, he realized that it was not the same driver or the helper, and there were no other passengers on the bus either.

'This will terminate at Hamdard Nagar. Where do you have to get down?' the driver asked.

'Um … Kalkaji,' Rishabh answered, disappointed at not finding the driver or the woman.

'It will be Rs 60,' the driver said.

'That is a bit much. I will give Rs 30 only. The driver who was there yesterday and the day before did not even take any money!' said Rishabh in a dismissive tone, although he would have gladly paid Rs 60 to the other driver.

'Which bus have you been taking, sir? This bus was locked up at Daryaganj Depot for over two weeks. The driver and helper of this bus were drunk, and mowed down a family of four about two weeks ago. It was in the papers. Here, take a look. This is the family that got killed,' said the driver handing out the newspaper to Rishabh.

Rishabh looked at the newspaper and went pale. The picture was of the driver driving the bus the last two nights, along with his helper, the woman and the girl.

'In fact,' the driver added, 'that drunk driver and his helper were also found dead near their homes in Bhogal and Mayur Vihar. One yesterday and the other the day before. Both were mowed down by a vehicle that hasn't been traced till now.'

BHULI BHATIYARI KA MAHAL

It was around four in the afternoon when Gaurav grabbed his camera and was about to head out to the Chandni Chowk gullies for a photo walk, when his phone rang. It was Vinay, the camera guy. Gaurav picked up the phone, wanting to hear about the whereabouts of the lens he had ordered. It had been three weeks, and Gaurav often contemplated if he had made the right decision to arrange it through him and not buy it online. It was more than Rs 1 lakh, which made him not only anxious but also nervous about how careful he would have to be while handling it; a make-do with a less expensive lens would not have delivered the same quality pictures. Photography was the only passion Gaurav had—it was his cocoon—something that soothed the discontent and anxieties of singlehood and the stress of a demanding job at a multinational.

Despite his hesitation to give the total amount upfront, he ordered it through Vinay, counting on the fact that he and Vinay were acquaintances and that Vinay, too, shared some love for photography. Vinay owned a camera shop at the end of Kherian Mohalla street in Gaffar Market, the holy mecca of sales, repair, phone unlocking and everything else that anyone could want or do with phones, cameras or electronics. He was the second generation running the family business of cameras and lenses in Gaffar and had displayed an excellent entrepreneurial drive that gave him a monopoly in the market with old customers of the famous Golu Camera of Chandni Chowk now coming to him.

'Hey, Gaurav, the lens for your camera is here. Feel free to drop in anytime to collect it,' said Vinay.

'Thanks, Vinay,' Gaurav replied, heaving a sigh of relief. 'I will pick it up today. I was heading out for a photo walk but will first come to you!' Although the lens took longer than expected, Gaurav was relieved that it was finally delivered.

It did not take long for Gaurav to cancel the Chandni Chowk photo walk idea. The photo walks that Gaurav had been a part of for some time now had started to tire him out. His passion now wanted some 'unfamiliarity' that he could capture with his camera, which was hard to find. Gaurav was often amused by people with DSLRs in Delhi and laughed at the craze of owning one. He would remark

to the group of photo-walkers that if one threw a stone randomly in Old Delhi gullies, chances were that it would first hit some DSLR-wala on a food walk or a heritage walk than anyone else.

As he kept the phone down, Gaurav messaged Vinay that he would take a couple of hours to reach the store. The camera already hanging on his shoulder, Gaurav picked up his wallet and the car keys, and drove towards the IFCCO Chowk Metro Station. It took him about fifteen minutes from where he lived, the Goldengate Residences. He parked his car in the Metro Station parking lot and bought a ticket to Jhandewalan. Gaurav needed to click a photograph of the famous Hanuman statue at Jhandewalan for a friend's blog on how the metro was killing the vibe of Delhi's history, a cause that Gaurav believed in half-heartedly.

It was Sunday, and the platform was almost empty; only a group of boys in their twenties stood by the escalators chatting away. Within two minutes, the train arrived. Gaurav boarded the train and took the first seat by the doors on the other side. The coach had relatively fewer people than he had anticipated. Gaurav was never comfortable with the proximity to people that came with public transportation, but he often felt transfixed by the world that kept moving around him. This was something he wanted to capture with his camera—this is what enticed him about photography—capturing the indefatigability of 'life'.

Contrary to his dislike for closeness to others, it was a perfect Delhi winter afternoon to get the buzz out of the setting winter sun and observe people go about their business, their idiosyncrasies, temperaments and manners. Gaurav was often melancholic and stoic, but his passivity and withdrawnness stemmed from something that even he could not understand. It was just the way he was. Dwelling on life came naturally to him.

An accidental nudge by the person sitting next to him broke his reverie. He had not realized that the train was about to reach Rajiv Chowk metro station. He looked at the Yellow Line map and then the display screen, which flashed Rajiv Chowk. Gaurav looked at his watch. It was 5.20 p.m.. The train took about fifty minutes to reach Rajiv Chowk, faster than it takes on a weekday. As the train halted at the station, Gaurav made his way out of the train and walked towards platform number four, from where he boarded the Blue Line to Jhandewalan. He stood next to the door in an almost empty coach, and with the train's movement, Gaurav's excitement about the camera lens soared. He would have it in his hands today, finally. In a few minutes, as the train approached the Jhadewalan metro station, Gaurav captured a few photographs of the 108-foot-tall statue of the saffron-coloured Hanuman overlooking Delhi—*Hanuman overlooked many other things*, Gaurav thought to himself. The train came to a screeching halt at the metro station, and Gaurav walked towards Hanuman Mandir to click a few close-

ups. The magnanimity of the statue commanded respect from all, near or far away from the mandir. Gaurav was overwhelmed by the captivating entrance door that was shaped like Hanuman's mouth. After clicking a few shots of the statue and the mandir entrance, Gaurav went up to the rickshaw-walas parked outside the mandir entrance and asked the first rickshaw-wala to take him to Gaffar market. The rickshaw-wala said, 'Sahab, there is a traffic jam on the main road. I will have to take Ridge Road. *Paise zyada lagenge*.' After the usual negotiations on the fare, the rickshaw-wala agreed but hesitatingly. Reluctance trickled down the his face, but Gaurav ignored it. He sat on the rickshaw and took out his camera, hoping to get some more shots of the seemingly ordinary life on the way to the market, or anything else that captured his attention on the ridge.

Gaurav had visited Gaffar Market many times before, but the hustle-bustle of the place never ceased to fascinate him. He often thought about the freedom fighter Gaffar Khan, whom the market was named after, and how the market would have looked when it opened in 1962 to the refugee traders and businessmen from partitioned Pakistan, who sold jewellery, crockery, garments and important wares for the home; in stark contrast to the present day, where people flocked to get the latest technology, counterfeit or original, at wholesale prices.

The bumpy kutcha raasta of the ridge prompted Gaurav to hold the rickshaw side rails tightly as the rickshaw passed the nineteenth-century hunting lodge of Feroze Shah Tughlaq, the Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal as the locals called it. Gaurav was familiar with the area, yet he had never been inside the Mahal. But he had almost always noticed rickshaw-walas slightly overwrought when they rode through the ridge, especially near the Mahal.

Just when Gaurav was going to ask about it, the rickshaw-wala exclaimed, 'Looks like last night the chudail from Mahal ventured out and claimed the lives of the two boys on bikes passing by late at night. People are saying that they heard her shrill cries first, then she suddenly came in front of them and overturned their bikes, killing both.'

Gaurav had, at times, heard about the famous hunting lodge of Feroze Shah but never believed in the bavardage of the place. For him, Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal was just another historical place, a delight for many photographers, historians and, of course, Delhi lovers. The Mahal did have an aura of mystery around it, but the thought of it being haunted never crossed Gaurav's mind, though he overheard many talking about it in the dingy corners and the small khochas of the Gaffar gullies; a lack of credibility or historicity compelled him to ignore such notions completely. Some rickshaw-walas refused to take the route

altogether, especially in the evenings; a few spoke about the hysterical laughter of a woman or shrill painful cries that sent chills down the spine, while others complained about the lack of security to manage or guard the place.

Gaurav looked at the ruins of the Mahal on his left. Besides the historical scenery, the only thing that was remotely tempting for Gaurav was the signboard that the ASI, the Archaeological Society of India, had installed at the entrance of the hunting lodge that read, 'Entry to the fort is strictly prohibited after sunset. Trespassers will be prosecuted.'

Prohibited after sunset, Gaurav thought to himself. He asked the rickshaw-wala, 'Do you know why this place is called Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal?'

'Nobody knows for real, sahab ji. Some say that this place was named after a Sufi saint 'Bu Ali Bakhtiyari' who lived here in the Tughlaq Dynasty, and his name got distorted over the years. Some others say that a Bhatiyarin—a tribal lady from Rajasthan—forgot her way and ended up here. After her, the place became famous as "Bhooli Bhatiyari",' the rickshaw-wala replied anxiously after a brief pause. He continued, 'Sahab ji, we just know that Bhuli Bhatiyari is a chudail. And we shouldn't talk about her for she could be near us.'

Gaurav deliberated on what the rickshaw-wala said as they reached the market. He tipped the rickshaw-wala and walked towards Vinay's shop while toying with the idea of doing a photoshoot in Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal.

As soon as Vinay saw Gaurav, he reached out for the box with the lens and handed it over to him without saying anything. Gaurav opened the box, examined the lens and, pleased with its quality, thanked Vinay. As Gaurav picked up his belongings to leave, Vinay asked in an inquiring tone, 'When do you plan to test it?'

'I was thinking of going to Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal to test it. What do you think? Do you want to come with me?'

Vinay was disconcerted by what Gaurav said.

'What is it, Vinay? You seem a little unsettled?'

'I think you should stay away from that place. It is not safe,' Vinay said.

'Why?' Gaurav asked.

'I've heard a few stories about it. Since childhood, we were never allowed near that place. My grandfather had a bad experience at that place and forbade us from going anywhere near it. And if you listen to his story, you might change your mind.'

'Well, this sounds intriguing. Do you think I could meet your grandfather and ask more about the place?' Gaurav remarked.

'Papa ji ends his day with a few pegs of whisky around the corner with his friends, and I don't think he will mind you sitting with them. I will be there too.

Tonight, at nine? But let me tell you, he generally does not like to talk about the Mahal. You can try, though! You can come here, and we can go together.'

'Done!' Gaurav said and stepped out of the store. He decided to walk up to Karol Bagh market and go to Roshan Di Kulfi for an early dinner. The streets of Karol Bagh and Gaffar Market reminded Gaurav of the pictures he had seen of the area in the National Gallery of Modern Art, from the early 1900s. The sprawling market was once a rocky area known as Qarol Garden, full of trees and thorny bushes, inhabited by villagers who were moved out of Connaught Place when its construction started.

Time passed quickly for Gaurav as he ate and walked in the nondescript lanes of the market. He bought some burfi from Standard Burfi and headed back to Vinay's shop.

The market had started to close and was buzzing with what was not visible during the day behind the flashy shops and the swanky shoppers. The small eateries in and around the market were busy catering to migrant workers; shopkeepers were heading home after the customary end-of-day discussions about the business, weather, politics, and cricket.

Vinay was closing the shop when Gaurav reached and decided to wait outside. While he waited, he saw a group of men at some distance huddled together under a tree sitting on white plastic chairs with a round table in the centre that had a bottle of Royal Stag, soda, water and local bhujia kept on it. Gaurav could see Ganesh Restaurant branded poly bag that gave off the heavenly smell of fried fish. Gaurav never grew tired of the nondescript ways of the Delhi-walas and often found charm in it. Vinay closed his shop and stood next to Gaurav, who was staring at the group. To his surprise, Vinay was going to take him to the same group, sitting in the middle of which was his Papa ji.

Papa ji was old and wrinkled, but his gait spoke of the heaviness of the experiences he carried on his shoulders, like the heaviness of character that some secrets render. Dressed in a white kurta-pyjama, his crisp white turban looking like a coronet, Papa ji had the appearance of a village Sarpanch. As Vinay and Gaurav got closer to the group of men, they all looked at Gaurav.

'They were all waiting for you,' said Vinay, as he handed Gaurav a drink. 'I told Papa ji I am getting a friend along tonight,' Vinay said to Gaurav and turned towards Papa ji, 'Papa ji, Gaurav wanted to know the story of Bhuli Bhatiyari.'

The colour on Papa ji's face changed as he gave a death-like stare to Gaurav and said, 'You remind me of Kamal.'

'Who Kamal, Papa ji?' Vinay asked.

Papa ji stared at Gaurav and sat there with a lump in his throat, fighting back the tears. He asked Gaurav to sit with them. Vinay was perplexed by Papa ji's

demeanour. He asked again, ‘Papa ji, what happened? Who is Kamal?’

Papa ji blinked, fixed his gaze on Vinay, and started narrating the story:

I was twenty years old when I started helping my father in his kite shop. He used to make the sharpest manja in the area and layered the saddi with a special mixture that only he knew about. I and one of my friends, who also helped my father, used to take the reels of manja to dry, but we were always looking for a big and airy place. That is when we found the Mahal. And while we waited for the manja to dry in the sun, we would eat our lunch in the shade of the old Mahal’s roof.

We used to go there often and never encountered anything out of the ordinary in the Mahal or its surroundings. But as the days passed, we started observing a few things. Sometimes, it felt like someone was watching us, or we would hear footsteps behind us and whiffs of air as if someone were running around us. And this thing, whoever or whatever it was, seemed to have a special liking for our faces. These episodes were enough to scare us away from the place forever. We did not go back there for a few months until the time I narrated this episode to my friend, Kamal, who wanted to know more and explore the area.

‘Let’s go back there once again and investigate,’ Kamal said to me. I could see intrigue oozing out of his eyes. But I was not sure. To be honest, the thought did excite me. The prospect of knowing the unknown was exciting and appealing at the same time. Eventually, I agreed to accompany Kamal.

The next day, Kamal and I went back and sat on a spot outside the Mahal, on the ridge. The spot offered a good view of the Mahal while the dense bushes and vegetation provided a good hideout. For the next eight or ten days, we went there daily, but did not see anything out of the ordinary. But then, one day, as we settled in our spot, we saw something. A well. In plain sight. Kamal and I were perplexed at the sighting. How was it possible? This was never there. We observed it from afar for some time but decided to go home as it was almost dark. On our way back, Kamal and I kept wondering about the well and its sudden appearance, but we were determined to go back to the Mahal the next day and take a closer look.

The next day, as we reached the Mahal, we could not see the well or even trace it. We looked around and found nothing in sight that even remotely resembled a well. There was no brick structure, nor any sign of water or a depression that suggested a well was there. How could you explain something like this? It was bewildering to both Kamal and me. We both saw it the day before, yet it had vanished overnight! Was it an illusion?

But suddenly, we were enveloped by a mist that seemed to have sucked the air from where we were standing. It felt like a vacuum. With the uneasiness swathing

us, Kamal and I shared a quick glance and without saying a word, started to walk in the direction of the Mahal's boundary. And as we took our steps, the well appeared in front of us. Like it had been there the day before. We both stopped in our tracks, wondering if our minds were playing tricks on us; but no, it was not us, it was something else—we found ourselves gaping at the entity hovering over the well. A spectre-like figure but not quite a spectre.

A woman. Dressed like a king's mistress, in all her regalia. But faceless. A faceless form, coming towards us. Her arms stretched out as if to clutch us. Kamal and I ran as fast as we could out of that place. In a matter of minutes, we were out of the Mahal's boundary and vowed never to go back there. But we kept looking back, unsure if she was following us.

Kamal and I did not speak to each other after that incident. I think we never wanted to speak of the incident or the fact that a phantasm, an apparition, almost touched us both.

It was midnight, but the story was still unfinished. The whisky bottle was almost empty; only the leftover chutney and onions from the fried fish remained on the plate; the last dying filters of cigarette butts were strewn on the ground. Since it was late to catch the metro, Gaurav decided to call for a cab as he had an early morning meeting at work and needed to pick up his car from the metro station parking at IFFCO.

Mondays were usually busy for Gaurav, and he did not think much about Papa ji's story until midday, when his phone rang. It was Joy, one of his photo walks friends. They had met once and kept each other updated on the new spots they often explored or discovered in Delhi. As he picked up the phone, Joy sounded excited,

'Dude, you won't believe what I saw yesterday on the photo walk. I still can't believe it!'

'What did you see that I haven't till now, Joy?' said Gaurav.

'So, we went to Bhuli Bhatiyari ka Mahal yesterday. Have you heard about it?'

Gaurav wanted to tell Joy he knew but wanted to first know what Joy had to share. 'Yes, I am aware of it. But what's so special about it?'

Joy continued, 'There were about twenty of us. Most of the folks were walking around the Mahal taking pictures and listening to the story of the place. Arvind and I decided to venture behind the Mahal, towards the main ridge. It was maybe the middle of the ridge where we spotted it. A well. It was a strange spot for a well, in the middle of a jungle, a bit away from the Mahal yet close enough.

We looked in and around the well. It was so dark that we could not see beyond a few feet. We could not even make out if there was water in it. And there was something off: the place was reeking of rotten flesh. We took some pictures of the place and went back to call everyone else to show it to them.'

Gaurav's heart sank. He could not believe that Joy was telling him about the same well that Papa ji had spoken about last night. But before Gaurav could say anything to Joy, he continued, 'But by the time we gathered the rest of the team and brought them there, we could not find the well. Arvind and I thought we were at the wrong place and looked around again. But the surrounding trees, bushes … everything was there except for the well. How was that even possible? How does a well disappear in an instant? The team thought we were taking them for a ride. We pulled out our cameras to prove that it was there. But our pictures had everything in them except the well. How is that even possible?'

Gaurav was baffled and unsure if he wanted to believe what he was hearing. Almost the same story about the same place coming from two unrelated sources. Was this for real? Gaurav wanted to tell Joy about Papa ji but did not. He made an excuse and hung up the phone, after which he could not concentrate on anything. The two stories kept playing in his mind and he kept questioning: Why did Joy and Arvind not see the apparition that Papa ji saw? Why was it seen only by Papa ji and his friend? What was the real story?

With such thoughts and questions running through his head, Gaurav was determined to see the place with his own eyes. He took the rest of the day off, went home to pick up his camera, and called a cab to Vinay's shop.

At Gaffar, Gaurav entered Vinay's store and saw Papa ji. Vinay was not around, and he thought of coaxing Papa ji into finishing the story for him. Without being too direct, he asked, 'Papa ji, I came to meet Vinay. Is he not around?'

'I think he went to get some things. How are you here today?' asked Papa ji in a matter-of-fact tone.

'I was just nearby and thought I'd ask Vinay about something. By the way, your story last night was interesting. So, what happened after you and Kamal got back?'

Papa ji looked at Gaurav and hesitated to answer, but continued while busying himself with stacking a few camera boxes on the shelves.

'When I got back, I went to bed but could not sleep for most of the night. The events of the day kept playing in my head, and whenever my eyelids got heavy, the image of that apparition flashed in front of my eyes, jostling me. Then around 7 a.m., I woke up to my father shaking me up saying, 'Kamal is dead, Kamal is dead.'

It took me a few minutes to understand what he was saying. But then my father told me everything. Kamal was found dead outside his house. His eyes were gouged out. His eyeless, stiff body was on the ground without another mark or injury. People say that his family was in the house throughout the night but never saw or heard anything.

Since I was the last person seen with Kamal, the police called me to give my statement. I told them that, like most days, we had roamed around the Mahal and returned in the evening. I did not tell them anything about the well. I was very sure that if I did, they would think I was making up a story and had something to do with Kamal's death.

But the most startling thing about Kamal's death was that the autopsy report concluded the cause of death as drowning. No one could make any sense of it. There was no water near Kamal when his body was found, and if the cause of death was drowning, why were his eyes gouged out?

The days following Kamal's death were a living hell for me. I could not stop thinking if his death was related to the apparition in the Mahal, and if it was after me now. The mere thought of meeting Kamal's fate sent chills down my spine.

I sought answers to my questions and asked old-timers about the place and its history. Everybody had different versions of it. Someone convinced me to meet the Pir at the Mamoo Bhanja Dargah at Jhandewalan, and I somehow convinced myself that he could alleviate my agony. I decided to meet the Pir and reached the Dargah in the early hours of the day. Without knowing what the Pir looked like, I asked a maulvi if he knew him. He took me to the Pir who was sitting outside the shrine. Dressed in a ragged green chola, the Pir looked like a statue of tranquillity. With each measured step towards him, I doled in confusion, awe and hope, wishing he would give me an antidote for the plague that afflicted me.

As I sat in front of the Pir, he took my hand and spoke, 'She will not kill you.'

The words relieved and bewildered me at the same time. I could not fathom how the Pir knew about the apparition, and that she was the one behind Kamal's death. I was evidently comforted, but I found something attached to my existence now—self-reproach.

The Pir went on to tell the story of the Mahal.

He said that in the times of Tughlaq's reign, an Amir had bought the Mahal and gifted it to his mistress. But the mistress was insecure and always worried about the Amir leaving her penniless and marrying someone else. Unknown to the Amir, she started stealing jewels and money from him and had a well constructed away from Mahal to hide the things she stole. The Amir eventually found out one day and, in a fit of rage, strangled her to death and threw her body

in the same well she hid the jewels and money.

It is said that the mistress's spirit never found peace and kept returning to find the Amir to avenge her death. And it is only when she comes out of the well into this world that one can see it, else it is not visible. It is also believed that the people that she killed had some resemblance to the nobleman.''

Gaurav now jostled with an altered perception of reality and myth; he wanted to rush to the Mahal.

It was early evening, but the sun was in its prime. Everything was postcard Delhi on the surface—beautiful ruins with the sun shining over the vast expanse of Delhi greens. But Gaurav was looking for something more—the well he desperately wanted to capture in his camera. He walked on the path that Papa ji loosely described in his story. But the well was nowhere to be seen. Gaurav was not sure if he was relieved or disappointed. But as he turned around, the well appeared before him. Nervously, Gaurav started clicking the camera and was able to capture a few just before the well disappeared again.

The appearance of the well frightened Gaurav, and he thought it was best if he spoke to Papa ji about it. However, considering the time, he decided to meet him the next day. As he walked out of the Mahal's vicinity, he remembered Joy telling him about the images disappearing from the camera. Gaurav kept checking his camera for the pictures he clicked. They were all intact.

Gaurav reached home and called Vinay to ask if he could meet Papa ji the next day. Sensing anxiousness in Gaurav's voice, Vinay asked if he was fine. Gaurav narrated the whole incident but said, 'I am sure it was nothing. Probably I can get more clarity if I could talk to Papa ji once more, but the pictures are still intact unlike what Joy told me.'

'I will come tomorrow to look at the pictures. I am in Gurgaon for some work anyway. You can come with me to meet Papa ji,' Vinay said and hung up the phone.

The next day, Vinay reached Gaurav's apartment complex and called him on his mobile but got no response. He asked the apartment security guard to check if he was home. The guard called on the intercom and checked the entry-exit register, but Gaurav was nowhere to be reached.

Vinay decided to finish up his work in Gurgaon and thought of coming again in the evening to meet Gaurav. He asked the guard to keep trying for Gaurav.

As Vinay reached Gaurav's place in the evening, he called him again but got no response. After asking around, he was told that even the guards and neighbours had been calling Gaurav, but no one could reach him. The neighbours even rang the doorbell to no avail. Vinay left to go back home, thinking Gaurav was busy with work or at his office, and decided to call him the next day.

It had been two days, and Vinay kept tirelessly trying to reach Gaurav. He decided to reach out to Gaurav's friends who were introduced to him for buying cameras and lenses. But even they had not heard from him. Frustrated at Gaurav's indifference, Vinay decided to go back to Gaurav's place and ask around. With the guards and neighbours having no clue about his whereabouts, he decided to meet the president of the apartment complex. Vinay told him that he had been trying to reach Gaurav but was unable to and asked if he could call the police to see if everything was fine. The president agreed and called the police, who decided to break open Gaurav's apartment door.

The police did not have to go beyond the hall to know why Gaurav was not picking up the phone. Gaurav lay dead on the floor. *His eyes gouged out. His eyeless, stiff body on the ground without another mark on his body.* The house was on the fourteenth floor and was locked from the inside—not even a window was open, and no sign of forced entry was observed. His camera lay next to him —viewfinder open and the glass cracked. One could see the photo of the ridge and the jungle—but the well was missing from the picture, just like it was missing from Joy's and Arvind's cameras.

As fear and commotion ensued, Vinay stood in the corner, paralysed. He could not believe he had missed connecting the dots. If only he had noticed the colour of Gaurav's eyes. Green!

Another thing that the Pir told Papa ji was that all those killed by the chudail had green eyes just like the Amir, who had strangled her. If someone could look beyond the murk in the well, they would have seen sprawling green gunk—the eyes of those killed by the chudail.

A few days later, Gaurav's autopsy report came out. It stated the cause of death as 'drowning'.

LUTYENS' DELHI

Divya had just wrapped an interview with Vogue. She had recently been featured as one of the top women entrepreneurs under forty. Divya had barely stepped inside her cabin after finishing the interview when Shalini, her public relations consultant, called and commended her in an exhilarating tone. '*The Economic Times* wants to interview you for their special edition next month. And I just got to know, after the last earnings call, you have become one of the richest self-made millionaires in India. Congratulations.'

'Okay, Shalini, let us do this last one, and then I want to take a break and concentrate on Chavi and my Lutyens' project. I am going to hand over the management of Colours to Anish.'

Colours was an organic cosmetics company that Divya had started fifteen years ago, out of her parent's one-bedroom rented house at Matia Mahal in Old Delhi. At a time when most of the cosmetic industry was selling the promise of fairness, Colours distinguished itself as a brand that created organic makeup products suited for all Indian skin tones and sold the assurance of 'Be Yourself' to all those Indian women who wanted to be accepted for what they were. The brand soon became a household name, especially for the middle class just coming out of colour bias. The company now had a foothold in the consumer market and was beginning to draw the attention of foreign investors.

Anish was Divya's childhood love, now her husband of eight years. They grew up together in the oldest parts of Old Delhi and shared each other's aspirations. Living in the abominably straight, constricted, and decaying gullies of Old Delhi gave them what they could not find in others—resilience, suppleness and the hunger to work for what they desired. They had successfully built themselves, and now, their lives revolved around Chavi, their eight-year-old autistic daughter. After Chavi's diagnosis and subsequent prognosis, Anish left his job as a Chartered Accountant and made Chavi the sole mission of his life. Nothing else had consumed Anish's existence for the last five years except Chavi and Divya. Divya was ready to sell off Colours to other investors when Chavi was diagnosed, but Anish convinced her to not abandon the only thing she took pride in. Now that she had taken Colours to the heights she always wanted to,

Divya decided it was time for her to focus more on Chavi and her other aspiration—the one that had been the sole driving force in her life till now.

Despite being a self-made entrepreneur and millionaire, Divya often found the typical Delhi high-class social life chafing her modest, below-average upbringing that she carried on her shoulders like baggage. It almost always resulted in an abrasion that ailed her for weeks. Her deficient upbringing, the lack of sympathetic awareness for Chavi's condition, and the impression of Anish taking a backseat career-wise often raised eyebrows in a society that trotted on the inexhaustible overflow of money and power. Divya was not hungry for any validation from the elite groups surrounding her. Tip-toeing the high-class society did not excite her. She was a smart spender and saved all that she could. Growing up in Delhi had taught her one thing: in Delhi, one did not need money to be fashionable; one needed to know where to shop. She got her shoes handmade from one of the stores on Panchkuian Road. She selected the leather and the design she wanted and got bespoke shoes made under Rs 1,500. Her oversized glasses were from Ballimaran, and her exquisite Lucknowi chikan suits were from Chandni Chowk. Her Rolex was a vintage 1945 Seamaster from a vintage watch dealer at Nizamuddin Markaz market.

She saved every penny she earned for the ambition that drove her—to own a house in Lutyens' Delhi. This had devoured her since childhood, and she worked hard to acquire what she aspired for.

Divya had spent her childhood living in one of the dingy one-bedroom dwellings built over the shops in Old Delhi. Her mother had died when she was just five. She was raised by her father, a salesman in a musical instruments shop in Chandni Chowk. In between providing the best education to her daughter and managing the day-to-day living expenses, he had abandoned the desire to own a house. Their lives were animated by the thoughts of sustenance, not becoming owners of accommodations. But no matter how proud Divya was of her father, she was too embarrassed to bring her affluent school friends to her house and never did. Every day, her school bus passed through Lutyens' Delhi, and every day, she dreamed of owning a house with a Neo-Baroque architectural style, lush palms, manicured gardens, colonial pillars and large lawns.

Until that dream became a blazing ambition whose flames scalded her every day.

The success of Colours had allowed Divya to move out of her Old Delhi dwelling. She now lived in a plush area of Panchsheel Park with Anish and Chavi, but to her, this house was merely a bigger place with walls. It never

became home to her. It was not what she wanted. It was temporary. Her ambition did not allow her to replace what she wanted. Many times, Anish tried to convince her that buying a property in Lutyens' was absurd, considering the amount of money it required. But Divya knew in her heart that Lutyens' was not for the rich but the powerful, the power that allowed them to own people, not just assets. Anish's attempts at convincing her otherwise were always rebuked.

It was early evening. Divya was helping Chavi with math when her maid brought Kewal into the living room. Divya had called Kewal to know where he had reached in securing a deal in Lutyens' Bungalow Zone. Kewal managed the deals for prime residences in the area and was one of the most sought-after real estate agents of Delhi's high society, who had Delhi's elite on speed dial.

Kewal had been trying to secure a property at Lutyens' Bungalow Zone for Divya for the past three years, but the soaring property prices overshadowed the possibility.

As she saw Kewal, she stood up, shook hands with him and said, 'Kewal, tell me you have good news for me today!'

'Yes, finally, I have been able to speak to the owners of that property at Aurangzeb Road. The one that had a showing with the caretaker.'

'Oh yes, that one. I liked the house. So, what about the owners?' Divya responded.

'The owner is based in London. He inherited the property from his father but was brought up in London, so he never really cared about it. The caretaker keeps the property in good shape from the inside, although it does require a lot of cosmetic work from the outside. But the owners have tabled the asking price at Rs 1.15 lakh per square foot.'

'Can I look at the pictures again?' Divya asked with childlike enthusiasm in her voice.

'Sure,' Kewal said and went on to show her the images of the property on his iPad while describing the house in greater detail than he had before. The description read:

'This beautiful bungalow has a built-up area of 8,078 sq. ft and is located on 930 sq. yds south-facing plot. The entrance to the property is on Aurangzeb Road. The property has only one level, with six spacious bedrooms and ensuite facilities, and one large common living area that joins the six bedrooms through corridors, all on the ground floor. There is a kitchen with a pantry, a breakfast room, and a large dining area overlooking a lawn. The lawn has a grill area and extends to the back of the house. The roof is open and useable as a terrace

garden. The house has three servant quarters and a covered parking area that can accommodate four to five cars.

The excitement on Divya's face was evident, and she blurted out, 'I cannot wait to start living in this house. Can you expedite the process, Kewal?'

Anish entered the living room, and Divya's excitement about the bungalow brought a sense of unease to him, almost sliding through him like a snake; it made him anxious. But he did not show it, for Divya's obsession with owning a house in Lutyens' was the focal point of her life. Even Colours was a means to an end. Anish gave a wry smile as Divya and Kewal continued their conversation on the sofa next to Chavi.

Kewal continued, 'The renovations to the bungalow and its surroundings might take a month or two but can be completed sooner.'

'Kewal, get the papers ready. It is my father's birthday next month on the twenty-first. I want to move into the house on his birthday,' Divya said, more determined than ever and basking in the possibility of her dream finally coming true.

'Sure. I don't see any reason why you should not be able to move,' Kewal said, picking up his belongings, ready to leave. He had worked with enough Delhi millionaires to know that when they wanted something, no questions were asked. He just had to make it happen.

Divya stood at her bedroom door and momentarily stared at the old Godrej steel almirah that stood out like a sore thumb in contrast to the otherwise contemporary furniture in the room. The worn-out almirah had the imprints of the '90s all over it—steel grey with five heart-shaped stickers placed diagonally on the left panel in the top left corner, a couple of Chacha Chowdhary cartoon stickers placed randomly on the right panel, and one 'Chandni' movie sticker on the top right corner, under the brand name 'Godrej'. The almirah had survived the '90s just like Divya had, but they both were worn out—one with use, and the other with ambition.

The steel almirah was one asset that moved along with Divya from one rented house to another, bearing all her valuables. Divya had refused to part with it. It contained all the paperwork, photographs, clothes and records related to her deceased parents and her past. There was no other place where she would keep her valuables.

Divya closed the bedroom door and walked towards the almirah. She opened the smaller safe inside it and took out an old set of affidavits and court records. As she held the records, she was carried away to a conversation between her and

her father in the one-room house at Matia Mahal, twenty-five years ago.

'Papa, Nidhi refuses to come to our house. Her mother told her we live in a dirty place,' a fifteen-year-old Divya said to her father with tears in her eyes.

'Tell Nidhi that we own the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The land where India Gate and Rashtrapati Bhavan and all those huge buildings are, is our land, and soon the government of India will give us money for it, and we will build a house near the India Gate. Go tell her,' Divya's father said.

'Papa, you are lying. How can we own the Rashtrapati Bhavan? It was built by the Britishers and now, the President lives there.'

'Yes, but once, your grandparents lived there,' said Divya's father proudly. 'You see, when the Britishers decided to move their capital from Calcutta to Delhi, they wanted to build it where Rashtrapati Bhavan, India Gate, etc. stand today. But this land was owned by farmers like my parents. Nearly a hundred and fifty villages in Delhi had to give away their land for the capital to be built. One such village was Malcha, to which your grandfather belonged. The Britishers offered a small compensation to buy this land, which the villagers, including your grandparents, refused. So, one night, the Britishers got cannons and attacked the unarmed villagers, and forced them to leave their settlement in the middle of a cold night. Since they had no means to make a living in Delhi without their land, the villagers decided to move to the village near Sonepat called Harsana, and settled there. But they never stopped yearning for their land. In fact, they renamed their village Harsana Malcha. A few years ago, we along with other villagers filed a case in court, to demand better compensation for our land at Lutyens' Delhi or to be allowed to rebuild our houses at the same place. Your grandfather died fighting the case, and now I am fighting it. I will buy you a house at Lutyens' very soon, Divya. We are about to win the court case. I can feel it.'

A tear rolled down from Divya's eyes as she looked at the records in her hands. All those Sundays when her father used to walk her at Lutyens' Delhi, showing her where their land used to be, their ideas as to what kind of a house they would build, and Divya's keen interest in clicking pictures of such bungalows—these were distant memories, but they brought a sickening nostalgia and angst to her when she reminisced. Divya picked up the Kodak hotshot camera from the almirah and clutched it in her hands. This was one of the few luxuries that her father could give her, and she cherished it. She was still fighting the court case and vowed to fight it till the end. As Divya sighed, she bemoaned, 'Until then, Papa, I have bought the house at Lutyens', for you.'

The next few weeks went by quickly as Divya's anticipation of moving into the new house grew. The deal was closed, and Divya got busy renovating and furnishing the house. In her preferred style, she intended to furnish the house with Raj-era-style furniture. She bought most of her vintage furniture from Amar Colony, at Lajpat Nagar, and had it restored. She wanted the house to resemble the residences of the erstwhile British Raj royalty.

It was the morning of 21 September, her father's birthday, and the day of moving to the new house. Divya and Anish packed their car with the most personal belongings that could not be sent with the movers and packers, and along with Chavi and Vimala, left for the house they had long been waiting for—never to look back.

The drive took them thirty-five minutes. Anish stopped the car at the gated driveway entrance. 696 Aurangzeb Road. The dual-swing wrought-iron driveway gates were designed in Venetian Style and were about nine feet in height, with pedestrian access on the left: these impressed not only Chavi but also Anish, who was seeing the gates for the first time as they were the newest addition to their opulent estate. The gates were automatic and remote-controlled, equipped with a keypad mounted on a pole on the right side of the gate and an intercom system. Behind the gates was the driveway, which stretched about fifty feet towards the main house. The house was at the centre of a lush green lawn skirted by palm trees. The lawn's boundary wall was about four feet high, with a roll of barbed wire that extended its height further. The next-door neighbours on the right had a similar set-up, but the only difference was that they had two floors to their bungalow and could easily peep into their property. This lack of privacy compelled Divya to have a pergola built on the patio, to get a secluded spot away from prying eyes.

Anish entered the access code and drove in. He parked the car under the portico entrance of the house and got out with Divya, Chavi and Vimala. Anish hugged Divya and Chavi tightly. Excitement showed on all their faces.

There was no pooja or conventional graha pravesh, but Divya offered flowers to her father's picture in the living room, which was the only ritual she required. The air was sweet and fragrant in the living room. Divya recognized it within minutes. But before she could point it out, Anish took a deep breath, enjoying the scent, and remarked, 'What a heavenly smell. What's that fragrance, Divya?' Anish looked around, trying to find the source.

'Nargis ke phool,' Divya answered, suddenly overwhelmed by the memories of the days when her father took her to the wholesale flower market, the phool mandi opposite Hanuman Mandir at Connaught Place, on most Sundays. As a child, she was bewitched by the colours and the fragrances. Her favourite was

Nargis ke phool. Divya used to wait ardently for them as they grew only in the chilly winter months. Every November and December, her father got some for her to keep in their home, and Divya would smell them for hours.

'I wonder who got them?' said Anish in an inquiring tone that rattled Divya out of the daze she was in. Divya smiled and said, 'Yeah right, I know you got them. I must have told you how much I love the fragrance of Nargis. Stop pretending.'

'I didn't even know that flowers like these exist. I have never seen them. Believe me, I did not get them,' Anish said, perplexed at Divya's comment.

Divya did not take Anish's reply seriously and laughed at the possibility of someone else conspiring to impress her. But it was too big an occasion for her to dwell on little things like this, and she let it pass without overthinking.

'Anyway,' continued Divya, pointing to the right-side wall of the living room, 'this is the wall where I want to put all my photographs, even the ones I took when I was young—of the old Lutyens' Delhi. They will look perfect here. What do you think?'

Anish nodded.

Over the next few weeks, Divya realized that moving into this house was not only her dream come true, but it also proved to be rewarding. She felt as if the house was taking care of all her needs. Of course, she knew that Anish, Chavi and the house help were all coming together to keep throwing these surprises at her. And she loved it. One evening, while on her way back after a tiring day at work, she craved a cup of masala tea. And the moment she reached home, a cup of masala tea was waiting for her in the living room. She called her maid and asked, 'Vimala, how did you know I wanted to have masala chai?'

Vimala looked puzzled and said, 'Didi, I didn't make it. I was watering the plants in the garden.'

Divya did not say anything but smiled. She knew that Vimala and Anish were up to something. They would do something nice for her, and when she confronted them, they would pretend that they had nothing to do with it. A similar thing happened a couple of nights ago. She was in bed when she realized she had forgotten to turn off the bathroom lights. Her exhaustion did not allow her to get up nor did she want Anish to. An irritated Divya murmured to herself, 'Oh, God, I wish somebody would just switch off the damn light,' and slept.

When Divya woke up next, she noticed that the lights were off. Divya knew that Anish knew how much the lights irritated her, and he must have got up to switch them off. It was such small things that made their marriage work. Anish, of course, like he had been doing lately, refused to take any credit.

The morning after, Divya thanked Anish for switching off the lights. But

Anish, still waking up from sleep, replied in a casual tone, 'I did not, Divya. I was so tired last night, I did not even turn sides the entire night, forget getting up! Maybe it was Vimala. You should tell her not to come in the room when we are asleep.' Divya was a bit unsettled at the thought of Vimala entering their bedroom but did not overthink it, considering Vimala had been working for them since Chavi came into their lives. Chavi and Vimala had a great bond, something Divya would never jeopardize considering Chavi's condition.

It was Saturday. Divya and Anish were in the kitchen making breakfast. It was a practice that both tried to adhere to. No matter how busy they were, they made the Saturday breakfast together, while Vimala looked after Chavi. The menu was always the same, Chavi's favourite breakfast—bread pakoras stuffed with potatoes, and mint chutney. Anish managed the kadhai, while Divya prepared the pakoras and put them in the oil. The breakfast table was set, and Vimala helped serve the bread-pakoras. As everyone sat together, Divya realized they had forgotten the mint chutney. As she turned around to get it from the refrigerator, she heard someone say, 'Mommy, can you please get some ketchup as well?'

The voice was familiar to Divya, but she wasn't sure if she was right in thinking who it was. A perplexed Divya turned around and saw Vimala and Anish gaping at Chavi, shocked. Divya ran towards Chavi and hugged her as tightly as she could. Chavi suffered from a speech disorder and had not spoken a fully coherent sentence in her life so far. She was undergoing intensive speech therapy, but she was unlikely to start speaking in full sentences. But in that instant, Divya felt exhilarated—full of life and love.

The move to the new house turned out to be favourable for Divya. Everything fell into place just the way she had wished. She started to feel blessed, almost convinced that someone was looking out for her and her family, perhaps her late father, who was now satisfied with Divya's accomplishment and blessed her with things she had always wished for. Over the next few weeks, there was a remarkable change in Chavi's behaviour and demeanour. Chavi was acting, talking and playing like any eight-year-old girl—an unbelievably remarkable feat for Divya and Anish. Even Chavi's doctors were astonished at her progress, and there was no explanation for this. The doctors ran their tests but could not explain the rapid transformation. No one could explain or rationalize the change in Chavi's condition, nor were Divya and Anish seeking any. They had their daughter with them, laughing, playing, talking, like any other child. Nothing else mattered. Anish and Divya were relieved to know there would be fewer hospital visits and therapy sessions for Chavi in the future.

Divya and Anish sat next to each other under the pergola on the patio that opened out into the lawns. Early November crisp air permeated the lawns as they sat in silence, relishing the fortunate turn of events in their lives, especially those related to Chavi. They felt blessed.

Divya turned her face towards Anish and said, 'Anish, I have often wondered if someone up there has been writing our destiny. I mean, look at how things have fallen into place for us. Take my business, for example. Between you and me, I do not think I have done anything extraordinary for this business to be so successful in such a short time. Now that I think about it, most of it has been lucky breaks. Remember the first big order that set the ball rolling for us? Although it was terrible that the fire destroyed the entire inventory of our client's preferred vendor, that is how we got the opportunity. Such a tragedy for that vendor but, even though I hate to say it, it was a lucky break for us. Our success has been a result of such freak incidents. And this house? Is it pure coincidence that we got this house at almost 60 per cent less than the market value—fitting right within the money we were able to keep aside for it? Somebody up there wanted us to stay in this house, and they made it happen. I think it may have been Papa.'

'I don't know about that, Divya. I think you are not giving yourself enough credit. But I will say this. Do you remember when we were sitting here and talking about Chavi, and you wistfully said, "I wish Chavi didn't have autism. I wish her condition could be cured." It all started after that. Don't you think?' Anish said.

'Yes, I noticed that as well. Wishes do come true, Anish. I should have also asked for you to quit smoking since all my wishes have been granted,' Divya said nonchalantly.

'Well, now that you have reminded me, I need to go and have one.'

Anish got up from his chair and walked towards the privacy wall of the pergola. He took out the packet of Classic Milds from his sweatshirt pocket, pulled out a cigarette, and settled it between his lips. He searched for his Zippo, clicked his finger against the flint wheel, and raised it to his cigarette. But as he got it closer to the cigarette, the flame died. Anish flicked the Zippo again and got it closer to the cigarette, but it died again. Anish flicked the lighter once more and covered a part of the lighter with the other hand to protect the flame, thinking the breeze was putting it off. But the flame went off again. But this time, Anish felt a breath of cold air on his hand, as if someone was blowing out air standing next to him.

He turned around to see if Divya was next to him, but she was still on the

chair. Divya caught his attention and asked, 'What?'

'Nothing. I just cannot seem to light this damn cigarette.' Anish shook his head, walked back to Divya and sat next to her. He could not light his cigarette again. Every time he wanted to have a smoke at home, he was unable to find the cigarette or, if he found one, he could not light it. Either the Zippo wouldn't flick or the flame would go off. These uncanny experiences deeply unsettled him, but eventually led him to stop smoking in the house.

Another of Divya's wishes had come true.

A few weeks later, on a warm sunny day in December, Anish stood out on the patio talking on the phone when he noticed Chavi through the glass doors, sitting in the living room. Curious to see what she was up to, Anish got closer to the glass doors and started observing her closely, confirming she had not reverted to her earlier self. It was a fear that ran through his mind almost every day.

Anish saw Chavi rolling the ball from one side of the room to another. Anish was about to turn away but stopped in his tracks when he noticed that the ball stopped midway and got rolled back to Chavi as if somebody were sitting on the other side of the room and tossing it back to her. But Vimala was out to get groceries, and Divya was at the office. An unusual fear gripped Anish as he ran in to see if someone was playing with Chavi. But as he entered the room, he saw that the ball did not roll back to Chavi; it hit the wall and rolled back to her. Anish sighed with relief but felt unsure of what he had just seen.

Looking at Anish standing in the middle of the living room, Chavi asked, 'Papa, you scared my friend. Now she is gone!'

'Your friend? What is the name of your friend?' Anish asked, sounding as casual as he could.

'Her name is Purva. She is fifteen years old. She told me she likes me, and mommy too!'

Anish was flustered but smiled at Chavi. It was not uncommon for children, especially those with autism spectrum disorders, to create imaginary friends to play with. Anish brushed the episode aside, but the only thing that lingered in his mind was that Chavi was not autistic any more. So why was she still having imaginary friends?

Vimala handed over a cup of masala chai to Divya as she settled down on the couch in the evening after getting back from work. The last couple of weeks had

been particularly stressful for Divya at Colours. Despite Chavi's better health and her stronger bond with Anish, Divya was having a difficult time with Colours.

Divya thanked Vimala and asked about Chavi.

'Chavi baby is in her room, Didi,' said Vimala.

'Can you tell her that I have got something for her?' Divya said, a tad bit excited about the stuffed teddy bear she had got for Chavi.

As Vimala turned around to go, she said, 'Didi, should I prepare food for guests if they are coming tonight as well?'

'What do you mean tonight as well? When did we have any guests? We haven't even thrown a housewarming party,' Divya responded, confused at Vimala's query.

'But Didi, Ambika, who works in House No. 697, just next to ours, told me that she saw a girl last night sitting on the patio by herself, at around one in the night. I thought you had a family over last night after I had retired to my quarters. Maybe it was Chavi baby. But why would she sit outside at night? You should ask her,' Vimala said and walked away towards the kitchen.

Divya was visibly perturbed by Vimala's words. Why would Chavi sit on the patio like that at one in the morning? She kept the teacup on the table and stood up to walk to Chavi's room, to find out about last night. But she stopped when she saw Anish coming towards her. Anish hugged Divya and asked her how her day was.

'It was stressful. I think I need to get more sleep and maybe take a few days off from work,' Divya said in a low voice, forgetting all about Chavi and what Vimala had mentioned.

Divya had been stressed lately. The latest collection of Colours was criticized heavily by a group of Indian Instagram influencers, since Divya had refused their marketing partnership and denied any affiliation. The vindictive influencers had recently launched a campaign against the products that Colours manufactured and left no stone unturned. They were successful with their hate campaign, and it was anticipated that Colours would suffer significant revenue losses in the last quarter. The recent sales numbers had left Divya fuming, and she exclaimed, 'I hope their Instagram accounts get blocked indefinitely.' She sobbed quietly in Anish's arms.

A week later, Divya was having breakfast with Anish and Chavi when she received a call from her assistant, who told her that the accounts of all the Instagram influencers were blocked indefinitely for inciting controversy against Colours and a few other cosmetic brands that were in partnership with it. Divya was secretly relieved as well as stunned at the sudden turn of events.

Another one of her wishes had come true.

Just as Divya and Anish finished their breakfast, the intercom buzzed. Divya went up to the intercom system and saw Aarti Dixit on the screen. Aarti was one of the influencers who was leading the incitement. She was at the door and wanted to meet Divya. Divya opened the main gates for Aarti and directed Vimala to bring her in.

As Aarti entered the living room, Anish introduced himself and asked her to sit on the couch. Aarti was a successful Instagram influencer, in her early twenties, with a commendable social media profile. Divya had seen her profile on Instagram and was impressed by her, even though Aarti was leading the diatribe against Colours. But Aarti looked different today. She appeared ruffled and dishevelled in contrast to her painstakingly meticulous appearance on Instagram. Was it because of the account suspension, Divya wondered.

Aarti started sobbing but wiped her tears and said, 'I came here to apologize for what I did. I am sorry about what happened. My Instagram profile was suspended last night as a result. I am sure you are aware of it. All I want to say is that I did not mean any harm. That's all I wanted to say.' Aarti stood up abruptly as she finished speaking and turned around to leave. She took a step towards the door, but just as Divya was about to stop her, Aarti collapsed. Divya and Anish rushed towards her. Anish shouted to Vimala to call the ambulance and patted Aarti's cheeks to wake her up. He sprinkled some water on her eyes, hoping she would wake up. But Aarti did not open her eyes.

Panic ran through Anish's body as he checked if Aarti was breathing. He tried to find a pulse in her neck but could not. Aarti's body lay on the floor, her face washed out, as if someone had drained the blood from her body.

Minutes seemed like hours and just when Anish decided to pick up Aarti and take her to the hospital himself, the ambulance arrived. Anish asked Divya to stay at the house and followed the ambulance in his car.

Anish returned from the hospital late in the afternoon to see a horrified Divya on the couch, staring at the spot where Aarti had collapsed.

Anish asked, 'Where is Chavi, and Vimala?'

'Chavi is in her room. I told Vimala to go to her quarters,' Divya said without blinking, still staring at the spot.

'Aarti is dead,' Anish declared, aghast at the series of incidents that had taken place, anticipating Divya's reaction to the news.

'What? But she just collapsed. How can she die, Anish?' Divya screamed, startled and shell-shocked at the news. Her eyes welled up with tears, and she held her head in her hands. In disbelief, Divya bawled, blaming herself for

Aarti's death and wishing her problems would go away. But she did not want her problems to go away like this. Aarti's death rattled Divya emotionally. In a shrill voice, she cried, 'I killed her, Anish, I killed the poor girl. It was my fault.' She pointed to the spot Aarti had collapsed on. Anish held Divya in his arms and reasoned with her that what happened to Aarti was not her fault. But words were not enough to pacify her. Divya was hysterical.

She stood up, wiped her tears and said, 'This house is tainted by Aarti's death, Anish. I don't want to live here any more. Just take me somewhere, Anish. Please.'

Anish tried to pacify Divya, but she was beside herself. Anish hugged her tightly and calmed her down, but she insisted that they needed to leave the house immediately.

Suddenly, the house became unnervingly silent. And seconds later, Anish and Divya heard someone's voice.

'I hate you, Divya. I hate you,' an unknown voice reverberated in the room.

Divya and Anish could not identify whose voice it was. They looked around and found no one in the room. Just as they were about to move towards the bedroom, a strong gust of wind stopped them in their place. The windows broke open and other things in the room were thrown around and scattered everywhere. Divya screamed for Chavi, who ran from her room towards her. But just as Chavi reached the living room door, something sent her flying to the other side of the room like a ball thrown from one end to the other. Anish and Divya rushed towards Chavi.

'Chavi, Chavi, are you okay baby?' Anish held Chavi and checked for any injuries.

Chavi did not answer. He asked her again, but there was still no response. Chavi's eyes were open, and she was staring blankly at the ceiling.

Anish picked up Chavi and took her to the couch. Divya sat next to her and tried to reach her doctor on the phone but could not get any reception.

There was silence in the room again.

The unknown voice reverberated, 'I hate you, Divya. I hate you.'

Divya and Anish looked around again, to see who it was, but absolute stillness greeted them eerily.

Divya looked at Anish and said, 'We need to go, Anish. I can't spend another minute here.'

Anish agreed reluctantly, thinking that a few days away at his parent's house would settle her. As Anish walked towards Chavi to pick her up, Chavi started screaming and mumbling, scared and terrified. Anish and Divya tried to hold her, but Chavi was uncontrollable.

‘Chavi, what is happening, Chavi? Calm down. Anish, what is happening to her?’ Divya cried.

Chavi’s body was pulled into the air as Divya and Anish tried to hold on to her. Chavi was levitating in the air while Anish and Divya stood stunned, paralysed, and unable to react to what was happening to her. Chavi went flying to the left of the room, against the wall, and then into the right wall. Her head was smashed against the walls, and blood splattered across the room, and on Anish and Divya. Anish and Divya stared blankly at the room trying to fathom what had just happened, gazing at Chavi’s blood-soaked, lifeless body slumped on the floor.

But it was not over yet. Anish was dragged by his legs and thrown across the room just like Chavi. Blood splashed on the walls again as Divya watched in horror. Divya let out a loud cry and ran towards Anish. As she took and rested his head on her lap, she cried, ‘Anish, please wake up. Anish, please.’

‘Why is this happening? Who is doing this? Why are you doing this? Answer me,’ Divya bawled.

There was silence in the house. Divya felt someone’s presence behind her. Suddenly, she was pulled by her hair and dragged through the blood and the broken glass on the floor. Divya let out a cry as she was thrown across to the living room wall, which had the collection of photographs that Divya had clicked of old Lutyens’ Delhi. All but one of the frames from the wall broke into pieces and fell on Divya. Something prompted Divya to open her eyes. Her gaze fell on the frame on the wall, which was oddly reflecting light.

Divya gathered herself and stood up to look at it. She realized that it was the picture of the same house she was now living in but clicked twenty years ago. She had never noticed it. She looked closely at the picture. There was a figure in the picture as well. A girl looking out from one of the windows.

And then it all came back to her. Passing by this majestic house twenty years ago with her father, Divya had seen a sad-looking girl staring at her through the window. Their eyes had met for a second, and as Divya had walked away from the house, she remembered mumbling to herself, ‘I wish I were living in this house. How can anybody be so sad in such a house? I will do anything to live in that house. Anything.’

Just as the memory came back to Divya, the last frame fell and shattered to pieces.

The girl from the picture was now standing in front of Divya.

‘You said you would do anything to live in this house. I made it happen, I gave you everything, and I just wanted you to be my friend in this house. But you could not do even that. You wanted to leave this house and leave me. But I will

not let you. You will stay in this cursed house forever, just like me.'

On some days, you can still see a woman and a girl standing in the window—waiting for another friend to join them.

THE BAOLI OF BLOOD

As midnight breached the colonnaded passages of Connaught Place, Irfan got busy settling down on his usual sleeping spot outside the Delhi Emporium on Baba Kharak Singh Marg, unfolding the roll of bedding that he had fastened with a chain and tied to the pillar. The recent gentrification of the emporium's exteriors had guaranteed the flatness of the floor at night, but the cold limestone slabs against his skin asked for more than just a bedsheet underneath the body. Nevertheless, he preferred sleeping on the paved passage outside the emporium and not in the dingy underpasses of CP for fear of criminal gangs crippling him or keeping him in captivity and forcing him to beg at their whim. This was a reality that Irfan fought with every day and night. Irfan had secured the spot after much hustle. He had negotiated a deal with the security guard responsible for manning the passage at night and paid him Rs 10 per night for the luxury. But there was more to the spot than safety: it received direct sunlight for most of the day that kept it warm, while the arcade protected him from the cold Delhi wind.

After cleaning the floor with a straw whisk broom he shared with Sonu, a fellow beggar who slept at an arm's length from him, Irfan meticulously spread some old newspapers on the floor before rolling out the black plastic sheet and putting a thick quilt over it. He had spent three months of his savings to buy it from Raja, a cotton carder. Raja dwelled on the pavement outside Shivaji Stadium and sold mattresses and quilts. He gave him the quilt at a discounted price and threw in an old pillow for free. Raja and Irfan hailed from Moradabad in UP and were bonded by the fibres of the memories they spent in their hometown. Many times, Irfan visited Raja just to reminisce about Moradabad and talk about what his life would have been like if he had not run away. Irfan was twelve when he ran away from home after his mother had died of TB and his drunkard father fed him beatings every time he asked for food. Living twelve years near the railway tracks with a drunkard father taught him one thing—resilience. One day, he boarded the Lucknow Mail and reached Delhi at seven in the evening, which was now his abode and had been for the past five years. After spending most of his first year outside the New Delhi Railway Station and then on the curbs of Paharganj, he finally took shelter at Hanuman Mandir, which he

now called 'home'. Irfan spent most of daytime begging outside Hanuman Mandir or selling pens at the Regal Cinema traffic light. The kindness of the devotees at the mandir and the langar at the neighbouring Bangla Sahib Gurudwara made sure that he never slept on an empty stomach.

Irfan wrapped a thin, black-and-white plaid blanket around himself, courtesy of someone's generosity at the Hanuman Mandir, and took out a small monochrome passport-sized photograph of his mother, the only thing he carried with him when he came to Delhi. Tears welled up in his eyes as he kissed the picture. He missed his mother and yearned for her day and night, wishing her to return to him by some stroke of magic. Of late, his dreams were full of his mother's memories. Many times, he saw a silhouette of a woman in his dreams, who called him lovingly and asked him to accompany her to the bazaar. He thought her to be his mother and took comfort in her company.

As Irfan drifted off to sleep, he sensed someone adjusting his blanket to cover his toes as they slipped out of the blanket. Moments later, he felt as if his own mother was cradling him, tapping on his arm, but dismissed it as his imagination, knowing that his mother was no more. But the tapping became vigorous and palpable on his arm; Irfan could hear the jingling of glass bangles and the iciness of hands against his warm skin. He woke up to see if there was someone around him but did not see anyone except Sonu, who was fast asleep in his spot, a little away from Irfan's. Irfan was about to lie down again when he felt someone's hand on his shoulder. The coldness startled him. He turned around and saw a silhouette, a woman standing behind him—thin, frail, short, just like his mother. The shining gold border of the saree she wore glimmered in the dark alley, just like his mother's saree would at night. Irfan could not see her face, but mulled over the likeness of the woman standing in front of him to his dead mother.

Could it be my mother? Did God answer my prayers? Irfan thought to himself.

'Come, Irfu, it is late. It is time to go home,' the woman spoke. Irfan looked at the woman and stared in disbelief. It was his mother's voice.

'Maa?' said Irfan, wanting to make sure the woman standing before him was his mother.

As the woman started to walk away from him, Irfan felt an urge to follow her. He stood up, as if in a stupor, and walked behind her through the streets of Connaught Place that were enveloped by a thick winter haze. Irfan was stupefied. He could not see anything except the woman in front of him, the woman he thought to be his mother. He walked behind her like a naive child who was enamoured by a beguiling stranger offering candy.

Irfan was thrown out of the daze by a blaring truck horn. In what seemed like

only a few minutes to Irfan, he realized that he had followed her past Jantar Mantar and was standing on the intersection of tree-laden Hailey Road. Irfan looked around without any recollection of how he reached there. The woman stood still about five metres ahead of him and looked different. Her hair was loose, and she wore a saree that was not what he had seen her wearing earlier. Irfan was uncertain if she was the same woman but kept following her through the misty bylane on the left of Hailey Road. The woman stopped again. Irfan found himself standing in front of Agrasen ki Baoli. The fog prevented Irfan from seeing clearly, but he realized that the woman was levitating above the ground and water was dripping from her body as if it were raining on top of her. But the water did not soak the ground. The ground beneath her feet was as dry as Irfan's mouth as he stood stupefied in horror.

'Come inside,' said the woman in a voice that was not familiar to Irfan. It was not the loving voice of his mother but a shrill voice. He gazed at her in terror. Irfan stood at the entrance of Agrasen ki Baoli, but could not make sense of why he had followed the woman or who she was. He turned around and tried to walk back but could not move. His legs felt heavy, as if someone had shackled his feet to the ground.

Standing at the arched entrance of the Baoli, he could see the vertiginous drop of the stairwell. Irfan quivered with fear. He stared blankly at the dilapidated walls and boundless dark depths of the Baoli infiltrated by the full moon's glum light—the dark alleys running on both sides gazing into the Baoli and the bats swooping down into the Baoli as if going after something.

Irfan was being pulled towards the Baoli by some force. He could not see the woman anywhere. He had seen her entering the Baoli, but she had disappeared into its darkness before his eyes could track her. Irfan tried once more to turn around, to get out of the place. But just as he took a few steps back to run, he stumbled and fell. Irfan struggled to pick himself up, but his right foot was stuck between two rocks. As he toiled to get his foot out, he was startled at the sudden appearance of two boys, who came forward to help him.

Irfan was somehow relieved knowing someone was around him in the dead of night. He cried for help.

'Can you help me, please? My foot is stuck between these rocks. I cannot get it out. Please help me,' Irfan hollered.

The boys appeared young to Irfan, aged between eight and ten, dressed in pleated shorts that were wide around the knees with white bushirts covered in grime. Irfan desperately tried to pull his foot out of the rocks but failed at every attempt. One of the boys came forward and stretched out his arm towards Irfan. Irfan reached out to hold the boys' hands, but his hand did not clasp on to his. He

tried again but could not reach it. In the middle of his desperate attempts, Irfan noticed that the boy was levitating above the ground and water was dripping from his body, just like with the woman. In an instant, the boys clutched Irfan by his arms. Irfan kicked hard and was able to dislodge his foot from the rocks. He stood up to run, but the boys restrained him and dragged him to the Baoli's edge.

Irfan screamed and wailed, 'Let me go. Please. Why are you doing this?'

He looked at the boy on his right and implored him to leave him but fell back in horror. The boy's eyes were blazing red. Terrified at what he saw, he wriggled and squirmed but eventually fell silent and resigned himself to the boys and the woman, who was now standing at the deep end of the Baoli, looking at Irfan.

The boys lifted Irfan and flung him down into the Baoli like a pebble. He ricocheted down the eroded stairs of the Baoli and landed at the woman's feet, his head lacerated and bleeding. Irfan was numbed by the impact that his body had taken. Through his failing sight, he saw his old friends from the streets who had gone missing. They stood around him in a circle and looked at him endearingly, as if they had long been waiting for him. Irfan saw Rahul, who sold pens at the traffic light, and Manish, the boy who sat outside Regal and polished boots. There were many more.

'Am I dead?' Irfan thought to himself, immobilized by the impact that overwhelmed his body and decimated his will.

The two boys plunged into the stairwell and caught hold of Irfan again. They took him to the top of Baoli and tossed him down as the woman watched. They hurled his half-mutilated body into the Baoli again and again, until Irfan's head was reduced to a pulp of tissue and bones. The woman let out a shrill laugh every time they flung him down.

Bhola opened his gunky eyes to the blue sky over Hanuman Mandir as the flurry of the chirping birds woke him. The peepal tree he slept under had been his dwelling for many years. He usually lazed around where he slept for an hour or so before getting up, but today was Tuesday. Tuesdays at Hanuman Mandir were particularly busy; one could earn around Rs 300 to Rs 400, and the generous temple visitors often sponsored a breakfast of piping hot kachoris and bread pakoras for beggars or drifters, in hopes of absolution from their sins. But Bhola was not a beggar. He prided himself on being a tourist guide. He coaxed tourists, both foreign and domestic, into listening to him and told them tales of the Hanuman Mandir—stories that no one knew or bothered to know—for a small charge.

Bhola got up, folded his bedding, and shoved it under Suresh Uncle's black

handicap tricycle. Suresh Uncle slept near him, under the peepal tree. Suresh was paralysed below the waist after having been in a road accident long ago. The government had given him a tricycle to support himself. The tricycle was also used as storage by both Suresh and Bhola. The flap underneath the seat was big enough to accommodate folded bedding and a small pack of belongings. Bhola reached out to take out the worn-out plastic fanny pack in which he kept his accoutrements—toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, hair oil, comb, a monochrome photograph of him with his parents, clicked when they had all gone to see the Taj Mahal, tucked away in a small notebook that he used to keep a record of all his earnings along with a pen. He took out the toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, and comb from the bag and went to the Sulabh Shauchalaya. Unlike most homeless kids, he did not mind paying Rs 2 daily to the Sulabh Shauchalaya for hygiene purposes; his mother had taught him that cleanliness was next to godliness, although Bhola's belief in God had ended the day his parents died in a train accident. After their death, his relatives had refused to take care of him; no one came forward to pay the rent nor made efforts to adopt him. The day after his parent's death, Bhola had packed a few of his belongings and wandered the gullies of Daryaganj before someone told him that he could get free food at Hanuman Mandir.

Bhola could read and write, unlike the others who lived on the premises of Hanuman Mandir. He felt accomplished and took pride in the English-medium education he had received till the sixth standard. He enjoyed a reputation of not being 'one of those kids' and wanted to keep it that way.

Bhola took around thirty minutes to brush, bathe and wash his clothes. It was almost 6.30 a.m., and he was ready for Tuesday. Hanuman Mandir's courtyard was bustling with the regulars—unassuming homeless kids, adult beggars, handicapped derelicts, and faithful devotees. Bhola scanned the premises for Kishan, his friend, and Suresh Uncle. Kishan was standing next to Suresh Uncle, near Kaku's Kachori Stall. Although Kishan and Bhola were not best friends, they did get along well; the grief of losing their parents at an early age bonded them on some level. They could understand each other's habits, whims and wishes.

Kishan whistled at Bhola and shouted excitedly, 'Come fast!' One of the devotees had sponsored kachori and tea for breakfast. Almost all the beggars and derelict community had queued up outside Kaku's Kachori stall. It was a common sight at Hanuman Mandir. Devotees sponsored kachoris, bread pakoras, and tea for the needy. Most shops there were generations old, and there were many, but the best of the lot was Kaku's. Bhola and Kishan always relished the kachoris that were cooked until golden brown, stuffed with a spiced dal filling,

and served with an even spicier aloo sabzi, coriander chutney, and topped with chopped onions and masala.

Bhola stood in the line next to Kishan, ignoring the disgruntled looks of the other beggars in line, and kept his toiletries in Suresh Uncle's fanny pack. Suresh Uncle had been living in the vicinity of Hanuman Mandir longer than Bhola and Kishan. The beggar community hesitated to talk to him, more out of respect than fear. Many beggars knew Suresh Uncle and gossiped that he once owned shops in Connaught Place and knew many things about the area that most people did not. Suresh Uncle had taken Bhola and Kishan under his wing and had trained Bhola, in particular, in narrating stories about CP and Hanuman Mandir to earn money. In return, Bhola made sure that Suresh had company. It was a good arrangement for both, and Bhola treated him like a father figure. But Bhola always wondered why Suresh Uncle's hands were always wet. Was it sweat, or did he compulsively wash his hands?

Bhola, Suresh Uncle and Kishan took turns taking kachori, bread pakora and tea from the stall.

'Look at those firangis in a group there,' Suresh Uncle exclaimed, pointing to a group of five European tourists standing nearby, two women and three men. 'Tell them the story of Hanuman Mandir. I think you will make good money from them.' Suresh Uncle nudged Bhola in the direction of the tourists.

'Yes, go, you can make good money early morning. Once these firangis have spent all the money on shopping and eating, they do not give that much. Morning is the best time to get them,' Kishan elbowed Bhola.

Bhola handed over his kachori and bread pakora to Kishan, not to Suresh Uncle as his hands were always wet and Bhola did not want his food ruined. He went over to the tourist group taking pictures of the mandir. He rehearsed his pitch in his heart and stood next to them, getting closer as the group noticed his presence.

'Story of the mandir buddies; it is a secret story. No one knows. Write on Internet, many likes,' Bhola spoke in broken sixth-standard English and started with his spiel. He knew exactly what most of these tourists were after—a story about Delhi that no one had heard.

The group was amused and impressed by Bhola's audacity and admired his confidence in communicating in English and tempting the group with social media fame. They agreed to hear him and pay Rs 200. Bhola led them to the pavement opposite the mandir and started narrating a well-rehearsed story with voice modulation and facial expressions. Bhola had mastered the art of storytelling and knew that any good story was as much about the art of telling as it was about the content.

Like an experienced storyteller, Bhola set the stage and started.

'This place, where you are standing, is as old as Mahabharat. You know Mahabharat? Kauravs and Pandavs? Krishna?' Most of the group nodded, and without explaining any further, Bhola continued:

This temple was built during the times of Mahabharata. There are other temples that are as old as this one—Kalkaji Mandir near Nehru Place; Yogmaya Mandir near Qutub Minar; Bhairav Mandir near the Old Fort or Purana Qila; and Nili Chatri Mahadev (Shiva temple) at Nigambodh Ghat, near Chandni Chowk.

The story goes that Bhima, the strongest of all the Pandavas, had the strength of several elephants, was once looking for a flower for his wife, Draupadi. This was after they were exiled when they lost the dice game. You know Draupadi? She was the wife of all five Pandavas—Arjun, Yudhishtir, Bhima, Nakul and Sehdev. So, Bhima was going through the jungle searching for the flower when he found an old monkey sitting in the middle of the path, blocking his way. He asked the monkey to move out of the way, but the monkey replied in the voice of a human, 'You are a strong young man. You could jump over me and go on.' Bhima refused to jump over him and told him to move again, to which the monkey replied, 'You can pick up my tail and move it aside if you want.' Bhima caught the monkey's tail but could not move it even by an inch. He exerted all his strength but was unsuccessful in moving the tail. He eventually realized that it was no ordinary monkey but some deity trying to test him. Bhima folded his hands and accepted defeat. The monkey took its true form, and lo and behold, Hanuman himself stood before the astonished Bhima.

Bhima bowed to Hanuman and asked for his help in the fight against Kauravas. But Hanuman said that he would not help as he could not interfere in a 'present-day conflict'. But he added, 'Continue with your efforts and you will succeed in the end as truth is on your side.'

When the Pandavas won the war, Bhima decided to build this temple in Lord Hanuman's honour. This is the place where he met Hanuman. This very ground. It was a thick jungle back then.'

Many in the group were impressed with the story. Bhola noticed that they were joined by a few more passers-by and relished in the thought of making more money. He was basking in their reactions to the story and continued with the next part, which was more of a surprise to all.

'It is believed that Tulsidas, who wrote the Ramcharitmanas and Hanuman Chalisa hymns in praise of Hanuman, visited this temple. During his visit, Tulsidas was summoned by the Mughal emperor, who asked him to perform a miracle, which he did with the blessings of Lord Hanuman. The emperor was

pleased with Tulsidas and presented an Islamic crescent-shaped finial, which adorns the temple's spire even today. It is also claimed that the crescent on the spire also protected the temple from the Muslim rulers who invaded India.'

Bhola pointed towards the crescent on the temple's spire. Everybody's eyes followed Bhola's hand and looked at it in awe.

'It is said the temple that you see today was constructed by Maharaja Man Singh I of Amber during Emperor Akbar's reign and was later reconstructed by Maharaja Jai Singh II. Jai Singh owned the bungalow nearby called Jaisingh Pura Palace. He was commissioned with the task of building Jantar Mantar nearby and used to visit the temple on Tuesdays. After the completion of Jantar Mantar, the Raja ordered the reconstruction of Hanuman's temple,' he added.

'Where is Jaisingh Pura Palace now?' asked one of the tourists.

'Right there,' Bhola replied, pointing towards Gurudwara Bangla Sahib.

'Jaisingh Pura Palace was converted to what is now Bangla Sahib Gurudwara.'

By the time Bhola finished his stories about the mandir, the crowd had become huge. The European tourists paid him Rs 300, a 100 more than what they had offered, and the rest of the crowd gave him whatever they could—a few coins, rupees, boondi parshad, peda or nothing. Bhola was happy. Rs 300 was more than what he earned on most days doing odd jobs at the tea stands, selling roses on traffic signals or cleaning utensils at food stalls.

As the crowd dispersed, Bhola got his kachori and bread pakora from Kishan, who had been holding it for him. It had taken Bhola two hours to engage the crowd and he was famished by the end. For the rest of the day, Bhola wandered aimlessly in the mandir complex, satisfied with what he had earned and taking it easy for the remaining hours. There were plenty of people distributing food, sweets and even blankets. Bhola gathered whatever he could and decided to sit with Suresh Uncle and safely store the food in his tricycle.

As evening descended on Delhi, Bhola sat in the company of Suresh Uncle and Kishan, recollecting the events of the day.

'Did you see Irfan anywhere?' Bhola asked Kishan. 'It's almost evening, and I haven't seen him all day. That has never happened before. Especially on a Tuesday. He never misses Tuesdays.'

'No, nowhere. No one has seen him since last night,' Kishan replied. 'Even I was looking for him the entire day and asked everybody about him. Sonu, who sleeps outside the cottage emporium near Irfan, told me that he never saw him in the morning. Sonu had to pack his bedding and tuck it before the emporium opened.'

Bhola and Kishan looked visibly worried. It was unusual for anyone homeless

to leave their bedding like that, especially in winter.

'Over the years, I have seen many children missing from the temple,' Suresh Uncle said heavily, annoyed at the plight of children who were homeless in the home they called Delhi. 'I will speak to constable Yadav about it, but I know he will shrug it off. He thinks it is common for homeless kids to wander to new places to beg or join some other begging gang. I know he will not take this seriously. But you both, listen carefully. You must fend for yourselves; no one cares about us, especially the children. That is why I try to help as many of you,' Suresh Uncle remarked, his head lowered, most of his face hidden by the monkey cap he wore.

Bhola admired Suresh Uncle's affinity for them and felt indebted to him. Suresh even made sure that Constable Yadav did not take hafta from them and helped them when they fell ill. He was a shield of kindness that protected Bhola and Kishan from the acrimony and frustration of the world.

Kishan's sleeping spot was near a tea stall outside Shivaji Stadium, a few minutes away from the Hanuman Mandir complex. He walked back every night after saying his goodbyes to Bhola and Suresh Uncle. Today, as he walked back to his sleeping place, he kept thinking about Irfan and the other kids who had gone missing. Kishan was not afraid; he was a child of the streets and knew how to care for himself. He was just seven when he was separated from his family at Haridwar. Like all missing children who were reported to the police, he spent the first few years in orphanages but eventually ended up in Delhi at Hanuman Mandir and had stayed there ever since.

Kishan took out his bedspread, which he had tied to a light pole by a chain, and spread it on the ground. First, a plastic sheet and then a thick quilt that he had claimed from underneath a dead beggar by the roadside. He took out a small pocketknife from his pant and kept it underneath the pillow. The pocketknife was a gift from his friend he had shared his bunkbed with in one of the orphanages. It had a sharp blade and had helped him many times—to fight off stray dogs at night or stray humans. Kishan looked around to see other beggars at their spots and finally closed his eyes. His thoughts wandered to his older brother, Monu. Kishan had spent most of his childhood with Monu, more than he had with his parents as they were labourers. Although Monu was older than Kishan only by three years, he took complete care of him and his needs. Kishan missed him the most and hoped every night that they would meet someday, just like they showed in the movies. Kishan dozed off with the thoughts of playing with his brother.

Around two in the morning, Kishan felt someone tugging at him. At first, he

dismissed the feeling, thinking it was happening in a dream. But moments later, he felt a hand on his arm, pulling him. Kishan opened his eyes to see if someone was standing near him, but there was no one. But he looked around and noticed someone hiding behind the tea stall, looking at him. Kishan shouted, 'Who is it? Who is there?' as he reached out for the pocketknife from under his pillow.

He stood up and started to walk towards the tea stall when a teenage boy, around sixteen or seventeen years of age, jumped out from behind the stall. Kishan was startled and pointed the knife towards the boy. The light from the streetlight shone on the boy's face. He looked familiar. The boy resembled his brother. Was it his brother? His brother would have been of the same age by now.

'Come, Kishan, don't you want to play with me?' the boy called out.

'How do you know my name, and who are you?' Kishan retorted as he felt a rush of emotions—the excitement of meeting his brother after all these years mixed with the perplexity of all of it being true or not.

'It's me, Kishan. Monu. You did not recognize me, did you? Come with me. I know where Maa and Baba are. I will take you there. Follow me,' the boy said.

'Maa, Baba? Yes, where? Will you take me to them?' Kishan cried at the thought of meeting his parents.

Monu started to walk, and Kishan followed him through the lanes of CP, past Janpath and then Hailey Road. They were now standing at the entrance of Agrasen ki Baoli. But Monu was not alone. Two more boys were standing next to him. The boys appeared young, aged between eight and ten, dressed in pleated shorts wide around the knees with white bushirts covered in grime. He saw a woman behind them, dressed in a saree with a gold border that shone through in the darkness of the night. All four of them were staring at Kishan. Kishan did not see his Maa or Baba anywhere, and Monu did not appear to look like his brother any more. He was scared and wanted to run away but was held by something unknown to him, as if his feet were shackled to the ground. And then he saw something that made him realize they were not what he thought they were; they were something sinister.

All of them were levitating, a few inches above the ground, water dripping off their bodies but not wetting the ground.

The boys started moving towards Kishan and someone's cries reverberated in the Baoli. It was a familiar voice. Kishan looked behind the woman when he saw a silhouette that looked like Irfan. *Irfan?* Kishan thought to himself, hoping it was him so that he could call him for help in this unfamiliar place.

'Irfan? Irfan? Is that you? Where are you?' Kishan screamed, frantically looking for Irfan in the dark Baoli.

The boys caught hold of Kishan by his arms and dragged him inside the Baoli. The woman floated in the air along with them, smiling.

Connaught Place was dressed up for Christmas. Red and green Christmas bows adorned the pillars of the colonnade, with small Christmas trees kept behind the display windows of almost all the shops. It had been a week since Bhola had last seen Kishan and Irfan. Kishan went missing a day after Irfan. And there were other children, like Neha and Juna, who also left the mandir complex. No one knew where they went.

Bhola was sitting next to Suresh Uncle, who was ruminating on the disappearance of the children. Over the years, he had lost many acquaintances and friends. Some left the mandir complex without informing, like Kishan and Irfan; others moved to new avenues to beg, mainly under the newly constructed flyovers of South Delhi.

'How do you know so much about Connaught Place, Suresh Uncle? You have never told me. Is it true that you owned shops in Connaught Place once?' Bhola asked in a cheerful, inquisitive tone, as if he already believed that Suresh Uncle did own a few shops in CP.

Suresh did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the spire of the Hanuman Mandir.

'Tell me, Suresh Uncle. I want to know,' Bhola inveigled him, touching his arm slightly. Bhola's touch distracted Suresh. He was going to refuse but then relented.

'I used to come here with my sister and mother. My sister used to buy bangles and colourful parandis from these shops. A fortune teller used to sit under this peepal tree, where we are sitting. He had a parrot in a cage. One would ask a question, in response to which the parrot would select a card and the fortune teller would answer. There were no lampposts or streetlights back then, only kerosene lamps and diyas that lit the entire complex.' Suresh pointed to the emporiums and said, 'Even these were not here back then. They were at the Queensway … wait what do they call Queensway now? Yes, Janpath. They were at Janpath.'

Bhola smiled and said, 'You call Janpath Queensway? Good thing you don't give directions to people, no one would even understand.'

Suresh did not pay attention to Bhola's words. He was reminiscing about his childhood and the old days he spent in CP.

'Kamala, my wife, loved shopping at these emporiums. I met her at United Milk Bar. Is that place still open? It was opposite Scindia House and the only

place that had a Jukebox. We used to put four annas in the Jukebox and play Kamala's favourite ghazal. We went for Jazz at Volga and jam sessions at Alps. Sometimes, we went to Hauz Khas village, but we used to love sitting under the mango trees outside the Qutab Minar and enjoying the first mangoes of the summer. Those were the times, Bhola. I miss all that. We had two sons. We gave them the best of everything. What was the name of the school? Ah, yes, Delhi Public School, a new school started by J.D. Tytler, built on the grounds of Cathedral Church of the Redemption in Church Lane near Rashtrapati Bhavan.'

Bhola was immersed in Suresh's words.

'Oh wow, I did not know you had children. Did you play with them? Where are they now? And your wife?' Bhola asked, wanting to know everything about Suresh's family.

'Yes, I took them everywhere. Their favourite place was Rumble Restaurant. You know, the open-air restaurant at Central Park. Its logo is a red jalopy. They had just started selling this American food, what do they call it … some dog ... Yes, hot dog. My boys loved it.'

Bhola knew there was no such restaurant in Central Park, but he did not correct him. He wanted Suresh Uncle to hold on to the memories of his family and Delhi, the way he wanted to remember them.

'We were a perfect family. Rich, happy. We were the aristocrats in Connaught Place. And we could afford most things. But you know what, more than anything else, my boys loved swimming here, in Connaught Place.'

'Swimming in Connaught Place!' Bhola blurted in surprise, as there was no pool near CP. 'Where did you go swimming? One can swim in the pools near India Gate, but in CP?'

Suresh did not answer. Bhola wanted to know more about the swimming part but could not help yawning. It was almost 9.30 p.m.

'I must go to sleep now, Suresh Uncle. I am sleepy,' Bhola said, and took out his bedding from under his trike. Suresh did not respond and was lost in the memories of the bygone era.

Bhola spread his bedding under the tree and drifted off to sleep thinking about his parents like he usually did. It was a habit he did not want to let go of; memories of his parents were the only thing that kept them alive. He reminisced about the stories his father read to him at night and believed that he was somewhere near him, looking after him.

A few hours after falling asleep, Bhola woke up to someone speaking to him.

'Bhole. Bhole.' No one had called him by this name in years. No one knew him by this name. Only his father used to call him that. Bhola did not open his eyes, thinking it was someone else. But moments later, he felt someone's hands

running through his hair. Bhola did not open his eyes. His father used to do that, and he wanted to feel it just one more time.

'Come, Bhole. Let's go home,' a voice said. Bhola woke up and sat upright. He saw a man standing a few feet from him. The man looked like his father, wearing the same clothes he had been wearing when Bhola saw him last, his arms behind his back. The man started to walk away. Bhola stood up and followed the man, past Janpath, past Jantar Mantar, past KG Marg.

As the man walked, Bhola noticed a change in his appearance. The man did not look like his father any more. His appearance resembled Suresh Uncle's.

'Suresh Uncle!' Bhola called out loud.

'Suresh Uncle, stop. I know it is you. Turn around, please. What are you doing here, and why have you called me? Where are we going? Where is your tricycle? How are you walking?' Bhola shouted out to him.

The man turned around. Bhola was right; it was Suresh.

'You asked me where I went swimming with my family, right? I am taking you there. Follow me,' Suresh Uncle said in a snappy tone, then turned around and started to walk again.

'But at this hour? We can go in the morning. Let us go back,' Bhola said, flustered at Suresh Uncle's desire to go for a swim so late at night.

'I also want you to meet my family. They will meet us there,' Suresh added.

'But where are we going?' Bhola asked, irked at his insistence.

'Agrasen ki Baoli,' Suresh replied and turned away from Bhola to walk towards the Baoli.

'Baoli! But there is no water in the Baoli any more,' Bhola shouted from behind, trying to convince Suresh.

'Yes, but back in those days, it was full of water. We used to go there every evening to swim. My wife, Kamala, and my boys, Ravi and Raj,' Suresh retorted.

Suddenly, Suresh turned around and said, 'But those boys. Those filthy beggar boys outside the Baoli used to trouble us. They tried to touch us, beg for food, and they followed us. They used to touch my boys' hands and ask them for money. Imagine! Us playing with filthy beggars like you! All you filthy beggars are the same.'

Bhola realized that it was not the Suresh Uncle he knew. Suresh Uncle was kind and gentle. He could not walk. He was paralysed. *Who is this person who looked like him?* Bhola thought to himself.

Suresh continued, 'I beat them up, all those bastards. I got my servants to beat them up and reported them to the police, who beat them even more. Saale harami … they wanted to play with my kids. I taught them a lesson,' Suresh spoke with anger and hatred. 'After that, we swam every day with no dirty beggars ruining

our day, no filthy children trying to play with my boys. Until that day.' Suresh Uncle suddenly lurched towards Bhola and grabbed him by his shoulders. Bhola was taken aback. How did he even do that? It was humanly impossible. Suresh Uncle was at least five feet away from him.

Bhola gasped, sweat dripping from his forehead.

Suresh's arms clutched Bhola's neck and dragged him towards the Baoli and continued speaking, 'Until the day they were hiding in the Baoli, waiting for us. They knew we came to swim at night when no one was around. They caught hold of us as soon as we jumped into the water. Six of them holding each one of us underwater. My boys ... I could see them struggle and fight, but they could not help themselves. They held our heads underwater and drowned us. But we did not leave the Baoli. None of us. For the last forty years, we have been taking revenge, each of you haramis, you filthy beggars. We get you to Baoli, and we kill you. Just like you killed us. And we keep you all as playmates for my sons. You wanted to play with them, right? Isn't that what you wanted?

Suresh dragged Bhola through the dark walls of the Baoli. For a fleeting moment, Bhola saw the many familiar faces of children at the mandir complex who had gone missing. Bhola cried as he was being dragged, 'Kishan, Irfan, Raju, Neha … Please help me. Kishan, get that knife, kill this man, please, Jeetu, Rinki … please help me.'

Bhola got no response from anyone. They were not friends any more. Kishan, Irfan, Raju, Neha, Jeetu and Rinki were nothing but apparitions trapped within the walls of the Baoli. They walked towards Bhola and stood around him in a circle. Irfan and Kishan caught him by his neck and dragged him, while Rinki and Jeetu caught hold of his legs and pulled him to the edge of the stairwell. Suresh and his wife watched as Bhola was thrown down again and again, until they had his soul with them.

On some nights, people can still hear the children's voices echoing in the Baoli.

PACHAS

'The doors will open on your left. Please mind the gap,' the metro train's automated announcement system brought Suresh out of the slumber he had slipped into after occupying one of the train's cold metal seats. He had boarded the coach at Rajouri Garden and changed two metro trains from Rohini East station to reach Shadipur Depot. The Kathputli Colony slum had been his home for many years, since he was one of the first few to set up his tent in the open field there in the late fifties. Now, Shadipur Depot was the closest station to his home.

Suresh was a kathputli-wala. He was a master puppeteer and had won many awards over the years, but those days were behind him. Now, he was just a local man who sold kathputlis in Rohini East, where he owned a small makeshift kiosk outside Lucky Collection, a small emporium that sold ethnic Indian clothing and souvenirs. Ever since the metro lines were laid down on the route, he took the train to travel to his shop and took the same route back home.

It was almost eight at night. The train's motion and the air conditioning almost always had a soporific effect on Suresh, like it did on many others. This fringe benefit made travelling by metro appealing and comfortable for many—it offered respite from the scorching Delhi summer, a convenience often mentioned in random chats between travellers in the metro.

Suresh sat on the seats reserved for senior citizens next to the glass separator near the entry doors. Nearing seventy, and like most old people, Suresh tried hard to find redemption in everything. The unforgiving events of his life had imprinted on him in ways he never imagined, and to top it all, his body remembered everything. This physical fragility was apparent on his timeworn, crinkled brown skin and the grey irises of his deep but empty eyes.

He realized the train had halted at a station but could not see the station's name from where he was sitting. He tried to look at the overhead train route map, but his myopic eyes refused a clear picture. Although the automated announcement woke him up, he could not pay attention to what it said. He saw people jostling to get out of the metro coach, while others were waiting their turn to get in, some pushing and others shoving. He looked at the passenger sitting

next to him and asked, 'Which is this station?'

'Kirti Nagar,' the passenger replied, attempting a sardonic smile. 'Did you miss the station?

'No, no, I have to get off at Shadipur Depot. It is the next one,' Suresh remarked as he adjusted his loosely tied turban with relief.

After about ten minutes of movement, the train halted at Shadipur Depot. Suresh rose from his seat and walked towards the train gates, holding a bag that had two Rajasthani puppets. Despite the rush of people, it did not take any jostling for him to step out of the train. People made way, more for his age than for him. He stepped out and walked towards the other side of the platform.

As he had done for the past ten years, Suresh toyed with the idea of jumping off the platform into the path of the train pulling in. Yet again, he could not move an inch. His body froze while his eyes watched the train halt on the platform, bringing an array of passengers. A low, soft chuckle erupted from his bag of puppets, interrupting his train of thought. Suresh swung his bag on his back and walked out of the station as if nothing had happened, like he had done for the past many years. He walked past the metro pillars, oblivious to his surroundings, took a left from the overhead tank, past the mall, and towards the right into the lane that took him to his house in the slum.

Kathputli Colony.

'Namaste, Suresh Uncle,' Heera Baajigar greeted Suresh as he practised juggling sticks in front of his jhuggi.

Suresh acknowledged Heera's words and nodded, but did not stop to look at him. He turned left into a gully, towards his home. At the corner was Suneeta's jhuggi.

Suneeta was a Nat—once famed for dancing with ten earthen pots on her head at one given time. And like most of them now, she did not dance any more. An accident had left her with a broken knee, and she never regained the balance required to perform. She was a friend of Suresh's daughter, with whom she was often found spending her time. But since Suresh's daughter's death, Suneeta had tried to look after Suresh in ways he allowed. She looked at Suresh and said, 'How are you, Uncle? Should I get you tea?'

Suresh gave a stifled smile and shook his head to convey a 'No' instead of using his words. No words meant he wanted to be left alone. He went past the mishmash of brightly coloured brick houses with corrugated iron sheets and stopped in front of his house at the end of the gully. His was the only house with a pukki chhat among the slew of jhuggis surrounding it. The house was just one big room with a small kitchen, and in between the falling plaster and the fading colour of the interiors and exteriors, the house kept its shape, just like his

daughter had left it.

Suresh unlocked the door and partly opened it, but did not enter the house. He pulled down the old, ratty manji kept next to the door and sat on it, putting his bag beside to him. He stretched out on it a few minutes later and stared into the dark open sky, thinking about the repeated failed attempts at killing himself. His failure did not frustrate him any more; it made him obdurate to go back to the station and try it again. Laying down on the manji, Suresh reminisced about his life—the accomplishments, failures, the things unnamed, and even those he did not want to remember. Tonight, his mind took him to the time he established his abode in Kathputli Colony.

Suresh was among the first group of people who had moved to Kathputli Colony. For the last fifty years, it had been home to around 3,000 families of magicians, snake charmers, acrobats, singers, dancers, actors, traditional healers, musicians and puppeteers. A large community of street performers, the colony was initially set up as a cluster of seven makeshift tents by wandering puppeteers, of which Suresh was one. Gradually, the puppeteers were joined by a clan of magicians and later by acrobats from various parts of the subcontinent. Over the next few decades, the performers set up more tents. And as Delhi grew, the colony did too. Soon, not just the performers but even migrants from places like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and other parts of India began to settle there.

Suresh was not only one of the colony's founding members but also a renowned Marionette puppeteer who had won many accolades and awards. It was this history that made him revered by all in the colony. But over the last twelve years, Suresh remained impassive and disinterested in the affairs of the world. He no longer cared about his craft or his people. He hardly spoke to anyone, or on any matter, not even on the government's decision to take over the land occupied by the Kathputli Colony residents and its plans to relocate them to Anand Parbat, a matter that prompted severe backlash from the colony's inhabitants. Except for Suresh, the entire colony fought tooth and nail against the government's decision. His apathy was met with scorn and derision by many colony members with similar social standing as him. But Suresh remained unmoved and maintained a stolid inward and outward appearance.

It was almost 9 p.m. Mohit stepped out of Rohini East metro station and flagged down an autorickshaw but then waived him off almost instantly as he changed his mind and decided to walk back home. He wanted to spend more time with his thoughts—thoughts about Richa, an unrestrained sea of pleasure he often swam in.

He tapped the pocket of his jeans to see if the engagement ring was still there. It had taken him weeks to select the perfect design and get it customized by a jeweller at Dariba Kalan. It was finally ready and in his possession. He could not wait to propose to Richa tomorrow, on her birthday. He had it all planned out. The arrangements were finalized: in the morning, the flowers would be delivered to her home, he would pick her up after work from Gurgaon and then take her to her favourite restaurant and propose there. He could not wait to make her his wife.

Mohit looked at his watch again. It was almost 9.30 p.m. at night. He picked up his pace as he approached the Bawana Canal, or the Khooni Nadi, as the locals called it. Its deep and opaque water took care of almost the entire water supply for the southwest part of the city. But this nahar was enmeshed in dread. Time and again, human bodies were seen floating in the canal—drowned swimmers, suicides, murder victims. The canal offered solace for the vulnerable or exhausted humans of the city who came to end their misery, often called 'life'. And then there was this urban legend of soon-to-marry men committing suicides at its banks. These were unlike the usual floating bodies. They had strange ligature marks encircling their necks. A couple of witnesses had reported that no one was around the victims when they committed suicide, and before they could help the victims, it was too late. But the police had found a pattern. These were probably murders that looked like suicides.

'Do not take the Khooni Nadi route in the dark,' Richa would tell Mohit, as he often took this route to his home from the metro station. Mohit almost always dismissed Richa's concerns, but today, for some reason, her advice surfaced in his mind as he crossed the canal's overbridge, and he could not shrug it off. Mohit pinned his anxiety on the expensive ring he was carrying, as the area was always dark. He tried to dismiss it and started thinking about the arrangements he had made for Richa's birthday and how surprised she would be when he proposed.

Mohit sighed and murmured, as if Richa were in his arms, 'I love you, Richa.'

'Mohit,' a low, soft voice replied to him.

Mohit stopped and turned around to see if there was someone who had heard him. There was no one. Mohit slapped his forehead and softly admonished his silliness for imagining things. As he took a few steps ahead, Mohit thought he heard Richa calling him from behind.

'Mohit, listen.'

'Ric ...' Mohit turned around, expecting Richa to be behind him but saw no one.

Before Mohit could utter her name again, he felt someone's hands around his

neck, trying to choke him. Mohit struggled to break free but could not find anything tangible around his neck to fight against. As he jostled with the unknown force choking him, Mohit was dragged towards the edge of the bridge. A shock rushed through him as he struggled to breathe and resist the unknown force he was fighting with.

Mohit was thrown into the canal. As he hit the water, he gasped for breath one more time before he was sucked down into the depths, as if rocks were tied to his ankles. Two passers-by ran towards the bridge as soon as they heard the splash but could not find anything in the waters or on the bridge. They looked around, but minutes after Mohit was thrown off the bridge, his body rose to the surface, dead. The passers-by called the police.

Sultan Singh, the inspector, was reluctant to probe the circumstances of Mohit's suicide. He anticipated that the investigation of the matter and enquiry of the passers-by would reveal the same answers as in the case of suicides earlier in the vicinity of the canal. Sultan was already aware of the circumstances that had led to Mohit's death. All victims jumped voluntarily, and there was no evidence of a struggle or force by anyone, except for the marks on the neck. For the sake of officially registering and starting an investigation, he asked one of the constables to question the passers-by.

'Did you see him jump? Was there anyone else with him?' asked the constable.

'There was no one here. He just jumped. We were walking by the side of the canal and heard a cry, and then saw someone falling off the bridge into the canal,' the passer-by revealed.

'Are you sure? Did you see anyone on the bridge or someone pushing him over?' asked Sultan Singh, irked at the futility of the answers.

'No. There was no one at the bridge. I am 100 per cent sure,' said the passer-by.

'Janab, looks like another suicide,' the constable remarked to the inspector.

It was a usual late evening for Kathputli Colony. Darkness descended over it like it had done every night. Night-time at Kathputli Colony seemed like a mega retreat of circus performers to their camps at the end of a busy day of entertainment. The magicians coming back from magic shows carrying bags of tricks; Nats, or the acrobats carrying large wooden frames used for street

performances; the puppeteers carrying bags of puppets returning from their shows; and the fire breathers practising their art in an open space of the colony.

Amid all this hustle-bustle, Suresh sat on an old worn-out armchair in his room, the only possession he had of his father. Kept in a corner of the room were the kathputlis, and each was unique—made in the images of men, women, and children. Some were short, others tall, some on horses and others on camels. All of them dressed in ground-length skirts, some with legs underneath, most without, their hands tied to strings; all could be manipulated to act, dance, or stay still at the whim of the puppeteer. But there were two that stood out. They looked corporal, almost mortal, but still tied to the strings.

Suresh stood up from his chair and walked towards the kitchen area. He picked up a knife kept next to the stove, a knife he often used to chisel finer details on the kathputlis. Suresh liked to craft his own kathputlis and give them peculiar facial features, as if God were creating his own children. He named them, clothed them, and even had conversations with them like they were alive.

He held the knife in his hands, pointed it towards his chest, and tried to stab himself. But his hands stopped inches away from his chest, like they were being held by someone, like they always did whenever he tried to stab himself. Frustrated at the futility of his efforts one more time, he threw the knife down and bellowed in agony and anger.

'Unnanchas (forty-nine),' a voice echoed in the room.

The next morning, Suresh took the metro to Rohini to his kiosk near Khooni Nadi. It was around 11 a.m. As he reached the kiosk, he saw a group of shopkeepers and street sellers huddled together in front of his kiosk. Suresh rarely spoke to them, but he had to intervene today, as they had blocked his entrance to the kiosk.

'What happened?' Suresh asked Veer Singh, a coconut-water seller who had his booth a few metres away from Suresh's kiosk.

'One more guy jumped yesterday in Khooni Nadi. Lived in Sector 37,' Veer Singh replied, looking at Suresh.

'Such a pity. He was a young lad, around thirty, thirty-two. Some are saying he was the only son. Can you believe that?' said another shopkeeper.

As Suresh heard the victim's details, he shook his head and let out a muffled grunt.

Veer Singh turned to the other shopkeeper and asked, 'How many suicides have occurred?'

'Unanchas … I think. The constable said that it is the forty-ninth case of

suicide by such young boys and girls—most of them about to get married. But it is difficult to tell, with all these other dead bodies regularly found floating in the nadi,' the shopkeeper replied.

The conversation drew in more people—customers, hawkers, and a chaiwallah who set up his steel percolator on the side of the curb, asking the conversers if they wanted tea. Soon there was a small crowd, all discussing the suicide and adding to the speculation.

'It is said that all the people who committed suicide were about to get married. Why would they commit suicide if they were about to get married and were happy?' remarked a bystander.

'Some say it's not suicide. They say it's a serial killer. An old man whose daughter was cheated on by a man on the pretext of marriage committed suicide by drowning herself in this nadi. So now he kills young men who are about to get married.'

'It has been forty years, forty! Rohini has changed completely in the last forty years, so has the area around the nadi, but these suicides have not stopped.'

Soon the crowd started to thin out as the discussion quelled in uncertainty and rebuttal.

It was almost noon when Chowdhury Surinder Singh walked up to the paan-wala for his daily fix, a cigarette. A fourth-generation farmer, nearing seventy-two, Singh was born in Rohini and tilled land there before his land was bought by the government to create the present-day Rohini, the first sub-city in Delhi, a project undertaken by the DDA in the 1980s. Singh, a hookah lover, dropped by the paan-wala daily for a cigarette, as his hookah had been banned by his family members for the good of his health. But Singh's love for it could not be fixed; the gud-gud of the hookah was now replaced by the huff and puff of a cigarette. He was now a regular at the paan-wala and made the trip every day under the pretext of taking a walk.

Taking the first puff of his Red & White cigarette, he hollered at Veer, in a heavy Harayanvi accent. 'Heard you made another one jump in the nadi yesterday. Did you?'

Veer gave a short snort and replied, 'Chowdhary sahab, why do you keep pulling my leg? People will start thinking I have something to do with these suicides.'

Surinder Singh guffawed at Veer's reply.

'Choudhary sahab, you have been living here in Rohini even before Rohini was Rohini as we know it today. When did this start?' asked Veer as he handed a cigarette to Surinder Singh.

Surinder Singh took a puff, adjusted his shawl over his shoulder, and spoke,

‘This canal was once the lifeline of Rohini. It was the main source of water for all the nearby villages and farms. The area around the canal was surrounded by fruit trees: mango, jamun, guava. The wheat fields around the canal were bountiful. But then, things started to change. The fruit trees started to die down; all vegetation rotted away. In fact, other than weeds and cacti, nothing else would grow here. The villagers stopped taking their animals to the canal as they started behaving differently in the area. Some people found two severed human hands next to the canal one day. Looked like the hands of a bride, with mehndi and wedding jewellery, but nobody could find anything more about the person. Since then, the Bawana Nahar became Khooni Nadi. A few years ago, the police had put up nets around the canal’s boundaries to prevent people from jumping. But the iron nets were vandalized to pieces every time they were put in, and that too, overnight. Imagine! The galvanized iron net, shredded and thrown around like pieces of paper. The police soon gave up and stopped putting them up.’

‘Kyun, Suresh, do you remember anything else?’ Singh asked Suresh as he turned towards him.

‘Suresh has also been here so long? I didn’t know,’ Veer said, surprised at Singh’s question.

‘Of course, he has. Haven’t you told anyone, Suresh?’ Singh asked. ‘Our Suresh here is a master kathputli-wala. He won many awards from the government for his art. He was the first one to get a shop under the government scheme of allocating shops to artists too. But he sold it later. Tell us, Suresh.’

‘No, I don’t remember anything,’ Suresh answered in a hushed tone and looked away.

As Mohit’s suicide became a mere statistic, Suresh continued to live on auto-pilot mode—wake up, take the metro to Rohini, display his puppets for sale, take the metro back to Shadipur depot, try to jump in front of the train, return home defeated, eat whatever was available, try to stab his own heart with a knife, fail at it, repeat everything, every day.

It was almost eight at night. Pankaj tried his wedding suit on one last time at the Raymond Shop showroom in CP. It was stitched to perfection, although he was uncomfortable with the length of the cropped trousers that ended just at his ankles. But Diya liked it this way and was present when the tailor took the measurements. She had insisted on them being cropped at the ankles.

‘I feel like I am naked,’ Pankaj told the tailor.

The tailor laughed. ‘That is how trousers are stitched these days, sir.’

‘All right, please pack it with care,’ he told the tailor and called for an Uber.

Pankaj dialled Diya's phone number and waited for the cab. Diya answered after two rings, 'Hey, I just picked up the suit. You'll love it. Will try it again when I reach home and send you a picture. I am sure papa will comment on the length,' Pankaj announced.

'Your entire family needs a fashion overhaul, Pankaj. Call me when you get home. Love you.' Diya disconnected the call.

'Pankaj?' an Uber stopped in front of Pankaj and inquired.

'Yes.' Pankaj sat in the Uber and started on his way home. He called his parents to inform them that he had picked up the suit and that he would be coming over for dinner. He had just taken up an apartment on rent in the same apartment society as his parents. Like most Indian men, he still went to his parent's house for most of his needs and found it tough to cut the proverbial umbilical cord.

'Congratulations, sir. I could not help but overhear. Congratulations on your marriage,' the driver tried to converse with Pankaj.

'Oh, thank you.' Pankaj smiled.

Just as the driver turned towards the bridge over Khooni Nadi, both were startled by a loud thud. It was as if a rock fell on the top of the car. As soon as the driver regained his composure, a long, red cloth flew over and landed on the car's windshield, blinding him. Before the driver could apply brakes, the car rammed into one of the trees just before the bridge over Khooni Nadi.

'Are you okay, sir?' The driver instinctively turned around and made sure Pankaj was not hurt.

The force of the crash was such that Pankaj had hit his head against the back of the driver's seat but was not gravely hurt.

'Yes. Yes. I am fine, but what was that sound? And where did that cloth come from?' Pankaj said, perplexed at the events.

'I have no idea, sir,' the driver replied, trying to start the car. After several unsuccessful attempts, the driver got down to check the engine. He could not find any apparent reason for the breakdown and walked towards Pankaj to inform him of the car's situation.

'Let me call you another cab, sir. There seems to be some problem with the engine. I am not able to figure it out.'

'It's okay. Do not bother. My place is not far. I can walk from here.' Pankaj got out of the car and stretched to ensure he was not hurt anywhere else.

He picked up the suit from the backseat and walked towards the bridge. His thoughts soon turned to Diya. 'I still can't believe that Diya agreed to marry me. I mean, she looks like a fashion model, and I am the opposite of it; yet she loves me like crazy,' Pankaj talked to himself.

‘Yes, Anku, I do love you like crazy,’ Pankaj heard Diya’s voice. Only Diya called him Anku. No one else did. Pankaj was startled and looked around.

‘Anku …’ Diya uttered again.

Baffled at hearing Diya’s voice but unsure of where she was, Pankaj exclaimed, ‘Where are you, Diya? Are you here? Are you following me or something?’ Pankaj inched closer to the middle of the bridge.

Suddenly a force threw him off the bridge into the river. Before Pankaj could regain his composure in the water, he realized that he was being strangled by strings wrapped around his neck. Pankaj could not see anyone around him but felt the strings getting tighter. Struggling to keep his face out of the water, he pulled out the keychain from his pocket and tried to cut the strings until he was free. With one big leap, he swam out of the water towards the canal’s bank. A few passers-by saw him coming out of the water and were quick to help.

‘What happened, how did you get here?’ asked one of the concerned passers-by.

Pankaj calmed himself down and said, ‘I think I fell over because I was bending over the bridge. I am fine now. Thank you.’

‘Are you sure? Do you live in Rohini? Can we drop you home?

‘No, I will take a rickshaw. I live nearby.’ Pankaj panicked, thinking about his suit. ‘Did you see a suit bag on the bridge?’

‘Do you mean this?’ said another man who had come to rescue him, handing over a suit bag to Pankaj.

‘Yes, this is it. Thank you!’ Pankaj replied, relieved to find the suit. Pankaj thanked the people who had come to help him and quickly found his way back to the road and took a rickshaw after drying himself under the fan in a shop.

As he sat in the rickshaw, the event of falling over the bridge replayed in his mind repeatedly. He knew the stories of suicide by people about to get married. If the news spread, people would think he had jumped to commit suicide. What would Diya think? What would his parents think? What if Diya called off the marriage?

Pankaj shook his head violently to shake off any memories of the incident and found comfort in telling himself that it was an accident. He mumbled to himself, ‘I made out alive, didn’t I? I will not tell this to anyone. Not Diya, not my parents, not my friends.’

He got out of the rickshaw outside his apartment complex. After he paid the rickshaw-wala, he walked towards Building A, where his apartment was. The building’s security guard called out to Pankaj from behind, ‘Sahab, does this belong to you? I think it fell out of the rickshaw,’ the security guard asked Pankaj, pointing to what seemed like a log of wood wrapped in red chunni with

gota-patti stars all over.

Pankaj stopped and turned around to look at what the guard was pointing at and said, 'No, it is not mine,' and walked away.

The guard picked it up and kept it on the table in the guard room, thinking someone could come back to claim it.

Pankaj took the lift to his fifth-floor apartment. As promised to Diya, he tried on the suit and sent over a few photos to Diya. Diya approved the suit and was delighted that it was terminated at the right length, just at the ankles, like she wanted. Pankaj changed into his regular jeans and shirt and went to Building C, to his parent's apartment.

Pankaj finished dinner with his parents and spent some time discussing some last-minute wedding issues that had come up. He was still ill-at-ease about the evening events and failed at his attempts to hide it. The image of strings around his neck choking him flashed in his eyes constantly. After some time, he left for his apartment and lay on his bed after making sure all the doors and windows of his apartment were locked. Pankaj decided to sleep with the lights on and drifted off to sleep after much agitation.

Suresh tossed and turned in bed, just like he had done every night for the past many years. The ghosts of his past were unforgivable and unforgettable. Every night, he dreamt of his rise from a poor kathputli-wala to someone who formed the largest performing artist community in the world, the Kathputli Colony. He came to be known as the master puppeteer, was presented with many awards, and travelled the world showcasing his talent. The government awarded him a shop in the upcoming sub-city of Rohini, where he set up his business of selling kathputlis and beautiful artwork created by her daughter, Sita.

But Suresh had always wanted a son—a son, who could carry his legacy forward, except that he did not have one. He was highly disappointed when his daughter was born, and his wife passed away in childbirth. He vowed to never allow a woman to learn the art he got in legacy. And for the longest time, he did not. But Sita was born with this art in her blood, especially the art of making kathputlis. Her kathputlis were lifelike, realistic, detailed and convincing. Though Sita was docile and accommodating of her father's wishes and expectations, she hustled to stay relevant in her father's life by working harder every day so that she could be accepted by him. Her art and persistence won Suresh over, and in time, Suresh agreed to involve her in his trade. Since Suresh mostly travelled for shows, he made Sita responsible for managing the shop. She knew she would get what she desired.

And desired she did. Hemant. Hemant was an orphan beggar boy who had been adopted by the Nats of the Kathputli Colony, and now he was one of the best nats. He had a flamboyant swagger, and his street shows were always a hit. It did not take long for Sita to fall for him; his charm and beguiling demeanour enamoured her in no time. Stolen looks turned into occasional words and words into secret meetings. Hemant and Sita soon started meeting every day—spending hours near Sita's shop next to the canal.

But their secret could not be secret for long. People of the colony had started talking, and Suresh was informed of their whereabouts one day, at the canal's banks. Hemant often travelled with Sita from the colony to the shop, and they spent their afternoons by the canal's banks when Suresh was out on tours. Although Suresh was livid at first, he wanted to resolve the matter in a different way.

It was in the afternoon when Suresh found both.

'Please, sir,' implored Hemant, 'I wanted to ask you for her hand in marriage. I promise I will take care of her. I just want to marry her.'

'Just come to the canal at eight tonight. I will give her to you. And I want this to be low-key. Do not inform anyone. I will throw a party for the colony tomorrow,' Suresh said to Hemant with a stoic glance and a stolid face.

Sita and Hemant went to Kathputli Colony to prepare for the evening. But Sita returned to Suresh after picking up her wedding attire and other things. Hemant decided to reach later around the time Suresh had asked him to.

It was five. Sita was wearing a red bridal suit with golden gota work, which she got made when she decided she would marry Hemant. She also wore her favourite maroon chunni with beautiful zari work on it. But Sita felt an unease deep in her heart. This unease had to do with her father calling Hemant to meet at the canal at eight in the night.

'But, Baba, why are we meeting Hemant at the canal? Should we not have gone to his house or called him here?' Sita asked, but thought they would all go to a nearby temple for the marriage ceremony, some temple in the vicinity that she was unaware of.

Suresh did not answer but looked at Sita ardently, awestruck at how she looked. They walked through the field across their shop towards the canal, with a lamp in their hands. Suresh could see some light near the canal's bank and knew that Hemant was already there, standing at the overbridge.

They were soon standing face-to-face. Hemant had a smile on his face, while Sita, slightly behind her father, blushed in anticipation of her impending union with Hemant.

Suddenly, there were movements in the bushes behind Hemant. Hemant

turned around to look. Sita stepped towards Hemant with her lamp and raised it in the direction of the bushes.

'Babloo, Heera, Rameez, Chander. What are you all doing here? Hemant, did you call them?' Sita exclaimed. Hemant shook his head, and Sita turned around to Suresh.

'Baba? Did you call them?' Sita asked, looking at Suresh, puzzled at their presence.

Babloo was a snake charmer, Heera was a flame thrower, Rameez was a nat, and Chander was local goon. All of them were blindly obsequious to Suresh. They were his followers.

Before Sita could get a response, Babloo and Heera nabbed and pinned Hemant down to the ground and tied his legs and hands. Suresh grabbed Sita by her arm and dragged her as Chander handed him a scimitar. Suresh stood in front of Hemant and asked, 'You wanted Sita's hand in marriage, right Hemant?' Suresh asked Hemant, as Sita tried to fathom the turn of events and why her father was holding her like that.

'Here, take it,' Suresh yelled as he raised both her arms in front of him and brought the scimitar down on her wrists, severing her hands. As Sita fell to the ground, her hands fell on Hemant's body. Sita's blood-curdling screams reverberated over the canal as Hemant lay stunned with Suresh standing over Sita.

'I will kill fifty people if I have to, but I will never let you bring a bad name to the family,' Suresh yelled at Sita before stabbing and killing her.

Rameez sliced Hemant's throat as his body slithered and blood oozed out of his neck, curdling on the ground. Rameez and Chander then butchered Hemant and Sita into small pieces and threw them into the canal along with the scimitar.

Suresh could not sleep after slaughtering his own daughter and her lover. Every time he closed his eyes, he was rattled by Sita's screams. Since the incident, Sita had met him in his dreams every night. Her corpse emerging from the water, covered in blood, repeating what he had said to her before he killed her,

'I will kill fifty people if I have to … I will kill fifty people if I have to …'

Suresh was now afraid of his own shadow.

But tonight, Suresh was determined to end it all. He got the knife from the kitchen, held it with his hands, closed his eyes, and brought it down to his chest swiftly. But the knife stopped just inches away from his chest. Once again, Suresh could not move his hand and felt like someone was clutching it. Suresh opened his eyes and felt a shock run through his body. His hands were held by a

kathputli that Sita had made in her own image for Suresh, so that he would not miss her after she got married. She had given it all the details of her face—big round eyes, a sharp nose, plump lips, and a mole on her chin. Sita had waited for the right time to give it to him, but the right time never came.

Suresh fell to the ground in fear. 'Sita' took the knife and threw it aside.

Suresh looked at the puppet with tears and said regrettably, 'I am sorry, Sita, I am sorry. Please let me die. Don't stop me. Please.'

'Not so soon, father. You do not deserve death so soon. That will be the easy way. You said that you will kill fifty more people if you have to. Remember what you said, "I will kill fifty more people if I have to, but I will not let you tarnish my name." Fifty people, who are happy and about to get married, will die, and you will be responsible for all. Only then will you be at peace,' Sita declared.

It was almost two at night. Royal Apartments was eerily silent. Shyam, the security guard, took the surveillance round of the apartment buildings and saw only a few apartment lights that were still on. He locked the apartment gates, picked up the chair on the side of the main gates, and moved it inside the guard room, certain that he would not be required to open the apartment gates the way he did early in the night. It was unusual for cars to enter the apartment complex at this hour. This was the time for Shyam to steal a quick nap. He sat on the chair, put his legs on the table, stretched his body, let out a huge yawn, and drifted off to sleep.

But moments later, Shyam woke up to someone's presence in the room. He sprang out of the chair with a jolt. Struggling to open his heavy, drooping eyelids, he gave the room a quick glance and was relieved to see no one. As he settled in the chair again, his eyes fell on the table where he had placed the bundle wrapped in red chunni that he had found by the rickshaw. But instead of the red bundle, Shyam found a worn-out star made of gota-patti in its place. He picked up the star and brought it close to examine, thinking it was a piece of jewellery. But the star that glistened from a distance looked rusted and almost black under the dim bulb in the room. He threw the star in the dustbin under the table and fell asleep again, certain that a resident had come to the room and collected the bundle from the table.

On the third floor of Building A, Mrs Sinha woke up to get a glass of water from the kitchen and switched on the kitchen lights. She had just finished drinking

water when a sudden draft of rancid smell diverted her attention and prompted her to inspect the kitchen sink and the trash can. She sniffed the sink's drainpipe and the trash can, but none of them stank. Mrs Sinha, still looking for the source of the smell, looked at the open kitchen windowpane above the kitchen sink and suspected that the smell had something to do from outside the kitchen than inside. Annoyed at her husband for forgetting to close the window, and at the resultant smell and mosquitos that were let in, Mrs Sinha stepped towards the windowsill and stretched out her hand to close the window. But as she reached for the handles, her hand touched something.

Mrs Sinha looked down, expecting a pigeon who had made a nest just outside the windowsill but screamed in horror and pulled back her hand immediately, shocked.

'Ajit!' she screamed from the kitchen and stepped away from the window.

Ajit, her husband, emerged from the bedroom, rubbing his eyes, and asked, 'What's the matter? Why are you screaming? Is there a rat or something?

'There was something outside the kitchen window. I touched it ... right here,' she said pointing towards her right hand.

'Please go to sleep, Anita, and for the last time, stop watching horror shows during the day if you can't handle them. Every night there is something or the other that you keep finding.'

Still shivering with fear, Anita spoke, 'No, Ajit, this was not a dream or a hallucination. I saw that thing, it was crawling on the wall, it ... it touched me right here.'

'Uff! Anita, I will check but this is the last time. No more horror shows from tomorrow.'

Ajit popped his head out of the kitchen window and looked down. There was no one. But when he looked up, he saw a silhouette crawling into the fifth-floor apartment's kitchen window. Ajit closed the windows in a haste. He was confused but did not tell Anita. He retired to bed with an image of something scurrying up the walls of the building—an animal perhaps, he convinced himself.

Pankaj opened his eyes to the feeling that something was covering his face.

'What the hell! Where did this come from?' he yelled as he tried to pull the piece of cloth off his face. He struggled to throw the cloth away as it wrapped itself over his hand. Pankaj abruptly stopped to take a closer look at the cloth. It had gota-patti stars and decorative sequins 'sitare' on it. It was a chunni, someone's dupatta that was old and ripped in many places. It had dark brown stains, which Pankaj found odd.

‘I have seen this dupatta before, I have definitely seen this before,’ Pankaj said to himself as he tried hard to remember, examining it closely. ‘It is the same dupatta that fell on the windscreen of the uber and caused the accident.’

Before Pankaj could comprehend the unwarranted presence of such a thing in his bedroom, his eyes caught a glimpse of a silhouette moving into the living room from the lobby, and the clinking of bangles with the jingle of ankle bells. Pankaj, flustered at the presence of someone in the apartment, grabbed his phone and ran after the silhouette to confront it.

The living room was dark. Beams of moonlight somehow invaded the room through the heavily curtained windows. Pankaj looked hard in the darkness and tried to find the person he thought was there. As he stood stupefied in the dark living room, the jingle of ankle bells got closer. Pankaj trembled and tried to unlock his phone to switch on the flashlight, but his trembling hands betrayed his need. The phone fell on the floor. Pankaj could feel someone move towards him but could not see anyone or anything in the straining darkness that had engulfed him from all sides. But a sudden flash of light across the room revealed someone standing before him. It was a woman, dressed in a red bridal suit, her face covered with the same chunni Pankaj had in his hands.

‘Diya, just stop now. I am scared, all right. Enough of this. Just let go now,’ Pankaj declared, as he had had enough of Diya’s pranks.

A gush of wind from the kitchen window slid the chunni off Diya’s face. Pankaj’s heart skipped a beat, and he fell on the floor, terrorized by what he saw. It was not Diya. It was someone else. It was not human. It was wood. A face made of wood, not muscle or tissue. White with large eyes that did not move or blink, arched eyebrows, and an overly angular nose bridge. It was not a human, it was a kathputli.

Sita stared at Pankaj as he returned his gaze in astonishment, fright, and terror. Pankaj wanted to run but was held in place by a force that had immobilized him. Sita moved towards him and tied him with strings. Like herself, a puppet.

The next day, Heera Baajigar found Suresh with a knife in his chest. He had killed himself.

Pankaj’s body was found hanging from the fan. They said it was suicide. What no one could explain was how he had hung himself with a thin puppet string.

THE TREE AT DWARKA, SECTOR 9

Delhi winters are for lovers. Delhi winters are for kebabs. Delhi winters are for strolls in Old Delhi.

Delhi winters are for having kebabs with lovers in Old Delhi.

Jahangir summed it up for all when he said:

Ek lukum kebab ho, ek pyala sharab ho,

Sultanate Nur-e-Jehani/Abad ho barbad ho

Emperor Jahangir was not a frequent visitor to Delhi and preferred to stay in Agra or Lahore, but whenever he came to the erstwhile capital, he could not do without his wine and kebabs.

The couplet states that as long as he got his wine and kebabs, it did not bother him whether his kingdom, virtually ruled by his wife, Noor Jehan, prospered or went to ruins.

Sonali shut down her laptop after writing these lines for her blog on Delhi's food history and looked out of the glass as the train crossed New Delhi metro station on the way to Chandni Chowk, where she was meeting Rohit, her boyfriend. She was finding it particularly hard to concentrate on her writing today as her mind wandered invariably to her recent experiences outside the Dwarka Sector 9 metro station—experiences unsettling enough to make her mind wander and wonder if the 'paranormal' was real. While she reminded herself that it was her imagination playing tricks, her heart told her otherwise.

'I will tell Rohit all about it today and see what he has to say. I am certain I am being silly,' Sonali told herself.

Just then, her phone rang. It was Rohit. Rohit had boarded the train from Green Park and had reached Chandni Chowk station before her, waiting eagerly for her to reach.

'I will wait for you outside Qureshi Kebab Shop,' Rohit said.

'Okay, but don't start eating. I will see you soon.' Sonali chuckled at her own remark.

The phone distracted Sonali and gave her a much-needed break from her thoughts, which now ventured towards the ease of commute provided by the Delhi Metro.

We don't give enough credit to the Delhi Metro for the revival of Old Delhi, Sonali thought. *The metro has made reaching Old Delhi from any city corner so convenient. Before the metro, trips to Old Delhi were reserved for special festivals and occasions like weddings. But now we can just hop onto a metro train for casual trips or just for eating. Just look at us. I am travelling alone from Dwarka to Old Delhi and Rohit from Green Park, and we will be at Chandni Chowk within an hour. Before this convenient mode of transport, planning such trips required at least a week of mental preparation.*

The train was about to reach Chandni Chowk station. Sonali stood up from her seat and, like a seasoned passenger, created spaces where there were none.

'*Ek minute, bhaiya, side hona*,' Sonali said to the man standing in front of her, blocking her way to the metro doors.

'*Aapko utarana hai kya?'* the man inquired.

'*Utarna hai tabhi keh rahi hu*,' Sonali replied, irked at the unnecessary question.

And by judicious use of her speech, gestures, hands, shoulders, feet, and legs, she was out of the train. Getting down at Chandni Chowk metro station felt like stepping into a circus of shoppers, businessmen, businesswomen, traders, and food lovers. People everywhere: most of them carrying enormous bags that no one wanted to topple over. While being careful not to knock over someone's bag or bump into somebody, Sonali swiftly took the escalator and was out of the station. She found herself standing at the entrance of the market.

She walked past Shani Mandir, bowing her head in reverence, past the clothes market and the long line of starving and salivating patrons of Natraj Dahi Bhalle Wala, before being out on the main street. From there, she haggled with a rickshaw-wala to take her to gate number five of the Jama Masjid at Urdu Bazaar.

Sonali got down from the rickshaw right outside Qureshi Kebab corner. Rohit was waiting for her on the side of the eatery with a plate of seekh kebab and roomali roti. He held the plate like an epicure, leaning his upper body over the carefully balanced plate in his hand. A *bon vivant*, Sonali thought. Eating while standing is an art and requires balancing all the items on the plate in a manner that allows no trespassing of a food item into the space of another, especially the ones that like to flow. Like in Rohit's case, the pudina chutney gently flirted with roomali roti, just meeting it at the edges without getting it soggy. Rohit had mastered the art. But for most, this art is acquired, learnt through repeatedly failed attempts at eating at weddings or roadside eateries where it takes patience and skill to keep the roti untouched by the flowy daal or the gravy of shahi paneer. The trick is to either take less gravy, eat fast, or try to position the roti on

the rim of the plate, keeping it in place with the help of the thumb. The last always works.

'You already ordered!' Sonali said as she walked up to Rohit.

'Of course! Why waste time?' Rohit replied and bit into succulent seekh kebabs.

After devouring the kebabs, Sonali slipped her hands into Rohit's and said, 'Can you imagine, about a hundred fifty years ago, Ghalib, by this time of evening, would have finished a few pegs of his favourite old Tom whisky with rose water and salted almonds, and would stand somewhere near the stairs of Jama Masjid, enjoying kebabs of his favourite kebabiya, Maseeta?

Rohit looked puzzled, like he often did when Sonali went into food-historian mode.

'You uncultured swine, you have no idea who or what Maseeta is, do you? Other than eating kebab you have no freaking clue about the history of kebabs in Delhi,' Sonali remarked with a smirk on her face. She loved to drop these names on Rohit and then educate him.

'Okay. Let's take the rickshaw to Lal Kuan, to my favourite kebab-wala, and on the way, I will tell you an interesting story about Ghalib and his love for kebabs.' They hailed a rickshaw to Lal Kuan, and Sonali started talking about her favourite topic.

'Two of the most famous kebab-makers or kebabiyas of Old Delhi were Maseeta and Ghummi. Both had their shops just below the stairs of Jama Masjid. In fact, Maseeta had such an important role to play in the life of Ghalib that after the mutiny of 1857, Ghalib wrote to a friend that Shahjahanabad had become such a despicable place that dogs growled about in Maseeta's shop, as the kebabiya had stopped using it for fear of the British. The Qureshi Kebab at Urdu Bazar, where we just had kebab, claims to be the direct descendants of Maseeta, but it's difficult to verify that claim.'

Rohit listened to Sonali intently through the cacophony of sounds around him. But he had no interest in food history; all he cared about was eating, yet he loved Sonali's passion for it. Together they made a great team for their blog.

They got off the rickshaw opposite Hamdard Dawakhana.

'And this,' said Sonali, pointing to a shop at Qasimjan Galli, 'is Ustad Moinuddin shop. In my view, the best kebabs in Old Delhi are made here. It all began in the mid-'60s, when Moinuddin moved to Delhi from Meerut to assist his father, who sold kebabs at Jama Masjid Chitli Kabar for ten paise each. By the '70s, he had gone solo and started selling kebabs in Kasab Pura in Sadar Bazaar; then in the early eighties, he moved to Lal Kuan.'

Sonali and Rohit had another plate of kebabs at Ustad Moinuddin's shop. By

the time they finished, they were full and dropped the plan of having jalebi at Dariba Kalan, at the famous shop whose board only said, 'Old Famous Jalebi-wala.'

As they walked back to the metro station to take the train back, Sonali's anxiety about the station grew. By the time she would reach Sector 9 metro station, it would almost be night. She wondered if she would see those 'things' again. Just thinking about it made the hair at the back of her neck stand.

'Can you drop me home from the metro station and then maybe take an auto home?' Sonali asked Rohit casually. She did not like asking for favours from anybody, even Rohit, but it was a precarious situation for her. She did not want to confront what she had seen around the station. And that strange man who seemed to sit day and night outside the station, under the tree, always creeped her out.

'Of course, but why do you sound so tense? Is everything all right?' Rohit asked.

'Umm, I don't know, really. I am sure it is just a figment of my imagination, but recently I have seen things at Sector 9 metro station that are a bit weird.'

'Things? What things?' Rohit was not sure what Sonali was talking about.

'Like, you know, weird people. See, it's late, and I don't feel safe alone.'

'Of course, I can drop you home,' Rohit comforted Sonali.

There was a moment of silence, and then Rohit changed the topic to lighten the mood.

'So tomorrow, are we going to Alkauser and Nizamuddin for kebabs?

'No, I have to be home tomorrow. I have a presentation that I must complete.'

'Okay, then we will go there next week. I can come to Dwarka in the evening if you are free.'

'Sounds like a plan!' Sonali nodded.

Both boarded the Yellow Line train from Chandni Chowk to Rajiv Chowk. The metro was packed, and all the seats were occupied. Rohit and Sonali stood near the entrance, next to each other, holding hands, watching parts of Delhi passing by, savouring Delhi on a crisp winter evening that promised heavy fog as night drew near.

Sonali and Rohit got down at Rajiv Chowk and boarded the Blue Line to Dwarka Sector 9. Unlike the Yellow Line, the Blue Line from Rajiv Chowk to Dwarka Sector 9 had just become operational and was not crowded. They sat next to each other. Sonali rested her head on Rohit's shoulder and closed her eyes. Rohit rested his neck on the glass window and slipped into a slumber. There were hardly any people in the coach, and the only voices were that of the metro train announcement system. The fog turned thick as the train moved.

Rohit opened his eyes after forty-five minutes to check where they had

reached. The train was a few minutes away from Dwarka Sector 9 metro station. It had slowed down because of some delay caused by a technical snag. Rohit straightened up a little, Sonali adjusted her neck to reach Rohit's shoulder but did not really wake up. Rohit was looking outside the train through the window on the opposite side when his eyes moved away from the window to scan the rest of the coach. He saw a boy, around twelve or fourteen years old, sitting quietly on the last seat with his head bowed down. He was so quiet that Rohit never noticed his presence on the train. *Where are his parents? Is he not too young to travel alone?* Rohit wondered.

He moved his focus away from the boy, back to the window on the other side of where he was sitting, and looked outside.

'What the hell!' Rohit almost jumped from his seat. He saw the boy walking outside on the train tracks. Instinctively, he looked at the seat where the boy was sitting. There was no one on the seat. He looked out of the window again. There was no one outside.

Sonali woke up to the sound of the announcement. The train was near the station.

'Are you okay? Why do you look so baffled?' Sonali was surprised to see Rohit edgy and unnerved, unlike his usual controlled self and calm demeanour.

'Oh yes, I am fine. Just thinking about something at work.' Rohit quickly gathered himself and flashed a subdued smile at Sonali.

Man, was I hallucinating? he thought to himself.

As they walked out of the metro station, Rohit looked around, just in case he saw that boy again. He did not.

The fog had fully taken over Dwarka. The streetlights to the right of the metro station were few and most were not lit. Once out of the station, Rohit and Sonali waited for an auto to take them to Sector 7, where Sonali lived. There was not much activity outside the metro station, but the regulars—a chai-wala and a paan-wala—were winding up and preparing to leave, although it was still early for them.

'Hmm. This is strange,' Rohit said. 'I don't know if you have noticed this, Sonali, but every time I come here, I see that the rickshaw-walas, chai-walas, auto-walas usually retire early for the night. There are fewer and fewer people outside every time I am here.'

'Exactly!' Sonali exclaimed, relieved to know that even Rohit noticed. 'Why do you think I feel a little uneasy coming here, especially late in the evening?' Sonali added.

Sonali did not tell Rohit about the little kids she had seen on the metro train and outside the station. There was something off about them. She knew Rohit did

not believe in such things and would end up making fun of her, so thought it best to keep such things to herself. She did not see the kids today, although she could see the strange man, as always, sitting under the tree with toys, chips and biscuits. But he never seemed to sell them to anybody.

Rohit tapped his pocket to look for a cigarette packet, but he could not find one. He turned around and rushed towards the paan-wala for a cigarette as the paan-wala prepared to close the rickety shutters of his small paan shop. The paan-wala handed over a pack to Rohit and closed the shutters, and Rohit handed him Rs 100 and lighted the cigarette. 'Don't smoke under that tree,' the paan-wala made a passing remark pointing towards a large tree, a few metres ahead of the metro station.

Rohit looked at the paan-wala and then turned in the direction of the tree, to see what the paan-wala was talking about. There were a few trees huddled together with a big one at the centre. It looked like peepal or bargad. Rohit was never good at identifying things that didn't matter to him. Trees were one of the things on that list. Apart from them providing oxygen to humans, he was never interested in knowing what they were for; he never thought of them or made any effort to know their kind.

But unlike any typical roadside tree, this tree was in the middle of the road with a cemented platform around it, raised to about three feet in height. The paved area covered almost half of the road and the other half was left for the vehicles to pass through. Stranger than that was the presence of a man under the tree with toys, chips, biscuits and chocolates spread around him. And unlike the others, he seemed to be in no hurry to leave the place, nor was he bothered by the vehicles that passed by him. Rohit found it bizarre that there was a paved platform for a tree, that too in the middle of the road, and that the PWD had not razed the tree for the traffic to go through smoothly. He also found it odd that the paan-wala asked him not to smoke there.

When he was done smoking, Rohit flagged an auto and got in it with Sonali.

'Sanskriti Apartment, Sector 7,' Sonali directed the driver.

'Rs 60,' the driver replied.

'*Arre metre se chalo, bhaiya*,' Sonali demanded, surprised at the audacity of the driver to ask for Rs 60 for a two-kilometre ride.

'Madam, its sixty. You will not get any auto at this station at this time. Even I didn't realize the time else I would have not taken this route,' the driver remarked.

'*Acha chalo*,' Rohit replied, ignoring the protest by Sonali.

'Tell me one thing,' Sonali asked the auto driver, 'Why is the metro station so deserted? Only a few board the train from here or get down at this station after

dark. Street vendors, auto-walas, rickshaw-walas, all leave before dark. Do you know why?'

The driver hesitated but relented a few seconds later. He cleared his throat and replied, 'I don't know how true it is, but they say there is a ghost at this station. Strange things have been happening here. I, too, witnessed something a few weeks ago.'

'Wow, really? What happened?' Sonali asked the driver as Rohit leaned in to listen.

The driver narrated his experience.

'It was Tuesday last week, around 11.30 at night. I had parked my auto a few feet away from the metro station. My wife does not let me eat non-vegetarian at home, so I picked up tandoori chicken from Sector 12 market and sat at the back for my auto, having a drink along with chicken. The road was completely deserted, but then, I suddenly saw two boys and a girl laughing and running around my auto. I did not know where they came from. The girl must have been five or six years old, and the boys seemed to be between eight and twelve. Just then, a bike rode past my auto and the children. Even the guy on the bike would have wondered what these kids were doing out there alone at this time of the night, so he looked back at them. But when he turned to look at them, the kids were sitting on his bike! Just like that. A moment before, they were walking and running on the road, and in the blink of an eye, they were sitting on the bike's backseat. The rider was scared out of his mind. He lost his balance and hit his bike on the platform under the tree and fell. I rushed towards them to make sure that the driver and, more importantly, the kids were okay. But in a split second it took me to step out of the auto, the kids disappeared.

'"Where did the kids go?" the bike rider asked as soon as he saw me coming towards him, shocked at the occurrence. He asked me if I had seen them, to which I replied that I had. We both were bewildered, at first, by their appearance and then their disappearance.'

'I hope you were not drunk, bhaisahab?' Rohit mocked the driver.

Sonali elbowed Rohit and said, 'I told you not to make fun of these things.'

'If you do not believe me, ask that man who sits next to the tree with chips, biscuits, etc. He also saw it. He seems to sit there every day,' the auto driver said, irritated by Rohit's comment.

Before Rohit could respond to the auto driver, they had reached Sonali's apartment.

'Do you believe in the story of the auto driver?' Rohit asked Sonali. Rohit wanted to believe the story, considering he had seen one of the kids as well, but he did not want to tell Sonali about it.

'I do. I know there is something off about that place. I just know it,' Sonali responded.

Even Sonali had seen these kids, and that man under the tree made her blood run cold. But she did not want to continue this discussion. At least not tonight. Rohit and Sonali said their goodbyes and planned to meet outside her apartment the next evening.

Since it was already late, no auto would have gone all the way to Rohit's house at Safdarjung. Rohit flagged down one of those end-of-duty call centre cabs heading that way.

Rohit spent most of next morning at home, reading up on the food history of the Old Delhi district. But his mind kept going back to the Sector 9 metro station story. After much contemplation, the right side of Rohit's brain declared that it was all made up and that there had to be a logical reason for all these incidents. Eventually, he did not give it any more thought. He left for Connaught Place around 1 p.m., and after having lunch at Triveni Kala Sangam with a friend, he watched a play at Mandi House. By the time he took the metro for Dwarka Sector 9, it was evening.

It was almost eight when Rohit stepped out of the Sector 9 metro station. It was even more deserted this time. There were no street vendors, none of the roadside shops was open, and there was no rickshaw-wala or auto-wala outside. Rohit waited for a few minutes outside the metro station to see if any rickshaws would turn up. But there were none. He checked his jacket pocket for his phone but realized he did not have it. He had lost his phone, probably dropped it somewhere in the theatre. Rohit was aghast but calmed himself somehow. It was getting cold and dark, and the fog was thickening. He sat down on the paved platform under the tree, hoping that some rickshaw would eventually come his way. Tonight, even the man selling chips and biscuits was not sitting under it. Rohit felt strangely alone. As he sat down on the platform, he took out a cigarette, completely forgetting about the warning that the paan-wala had given him the day before about not smoking under the tree. He took out his lighter, lighted the cigarette, and took one long drag. As he moved his hand closer to his mouth to take the second puff, he felt a cold whiff of air on his hand. Ignoring it, he brought the cigarette closer to his mouth to inhale a puff but saw that the cigarette was extinguished.

Rohit was puzzled but thought little of it. He took out the lighter again. He pressed the button of his windproof lighter, and the flames danced out of it. But every time Rohit brought the lighter closer to the cigarette between his lips, the

flame went off, and Rohit felt the same icy whiff of air on his cheeks, as if someone were blowing air on his lighter.

He flicked the lighter a few more times. Same result. Same cold whiff of air.

'The lighter is windproof, and there is hardly any wind. Why is this thing not working, and why do I feel those wisps of icy air on my hand and face?' Rohit mumbled. Having waited long enough, Rohit stood up and started walking towards the metro gates. But as soon as he started walking, he was overtaken by the smell of talcum powder.

'What the hell! Why am I smelling of talcum powder? It has been years since I used talcum powder and it's the middle of winter. Who applies talcum powder in winter?' Rohit uttered, baffled at the strange things happening to him.

He pulled the neck of his sweater and tucked his nose inside it to smell himself. The smell was indeed coming from him. Rohit was getting irritated and regretting his decision to come to the station at night. But just as he was entering the station gates, he saw a rickshaw coming towards him. Relieved, he flagged the rickshaw down.

'Bhaiya, just drop me anywhere near Sector 7.' Rohit hopped onto the back of the rickshaw. The rickshaw-wala rode the rickshaw but abruptly stopped after a few minutes and started to sniff, as if trying to smell something.

'Did you meet that man under the tree outside the Sector 9 metro station?' the rickshaw-wala asked Rohit nervously.

'No, I did not meet anyone. Why?' Rohit said. 'He was not even there today. I was just sitting under the tree waiting for an auto.' Rohit immediately realized that he was explaining himself to a random unknown person.

'Get down, go, get down immediately!' screamed the rickshaw-wala as he almost pushed Rohit out of the rickshaw and rode away from him as fast as he could.

Rohit threw his arms in the air, exasperated. By now, he was genuinely scared to be in the area and decided to go home without meeting Sonali. Fear kicked in the adrenalin in Rohit, and he ran towards the main crossing of Dwarka's Ramphal Chowk. But it was late, and no auto was willing to go to South Delhi at this time of the night. With much difficulty and after offering one-and-a-half times the usual fare, he convinced one driver to take him.

Rohit hopped in the back seat, and once the auto was on the way, Rohit heaved a sigh of relief. Just then, there was a thud on the roof. The noise startled Rohit, but the driver seemed unperturbed.

'Hawa hogi,' he said casually and continued to drive.

'Well, the driver knows best.' Rohit relaxed a little.

He dropped his shoulder, let his body slip casually into the seat, rested his

head on the edge of the back seat, and closed his eyes. Rohit was exhausted. Not because of physical exertion, but because the fear of the unknown had sapped all the energy out of him. In the auto, Katrina Kaif was behind him, Aishwarya Rai on his left, and Salman Khan on his right. Things were normal again for Rohit.

Just then, the angry voice of the driver startled him, 'Keep your foot down. Your feet are touching me.'

'What are you talking about? My feet are down, look!' Rohit answered.

As the driver looked around, he missed the pothole and rammed the auto into the pavement. Although both were rattled, no one was hurt. But Rohit was shocked. This was the last thing he wanted tonight.

'What the hell happened to you?' Rohit asked the driver. But the driver did not respond to Rohit. Rohit tapped on the driver's shoulders and asked again, '*Kya baat bhai, theek ho*?'

'Someone was kicking me from the back and then pushed me aside. Someone was sitting on my shoulder; *something* was sitting on my shoulder. Someone pushed me,' the driver said, visibly agitated and shaken by the incident.

A small crowd gathered around them. Someone offered water to Rohit and the driver. Rohit sat on the pavement for a while, trying to calm his frayed nerves but without success. He closed his eyes and questioned if this was all a nightmare. After a few minutes, he stood up. All he wanted was to get away from all this and be home. But he did not want to take another auto; he wanted to be among people. It had been a while since he had boarded a bus, so he enquired from a passer-by the way to the nearest bus stop.

There was one in Sector 1, which was only a few metres away and was a well-lit one with quite a few people standing to catch a ride. He did not have to wait much; bus number 600 to Bhikaji Cama Place arrived after ten minutes of waiting. Rohit boarded the bus and decided to get down at Bhikaji Cama Place and walk from there to his home in Safdarjung Enclave.

The moment he boarded the bus, he realized people were staring at him as he walked past them. It was the smell! The damn smell of talcum powder! While he was out in the open, it was not too noticeable, but now, within the close confines of the DTC bus, the smell was overpowering. On a typical winter day, a DTC bus smelt of diesel combined with sweat and a hint of citrus and peanuts, thanks to the number of oranges and peanuts consumed by passengers. But this one reeked of cheap talcum powder. Rohit took a seat at the back, hoping to avoid attention. People on the bus soon adjusted to the smell. The people of Delhi in public buses are used to adjusting for seats, body odour, invasion of personal space, and sexual harassment. Talcum powder was no big deal.

The bus ride was uneventful. The people, lights and sounds of Delhi had a

calming effect on Rohit. He got down at Bhikaji Cama Place bus stop and walked towards his house in Safdarjung Enclave. Although Rohit was appropriately dressed for Delhi winters, he was feeling chilly. He could not tell if it was because of fear or the temperature on the road, which was always a few degrees lower because of the greenery oozing out of the adjoining Deer Park.

Rohit reached home but was surprised to see it all dark. 'Oh shit!' Rohit said as he realized he had forgot all about his parents leaving for Chandigarh in the evening. He was home alone this weekend. Although he tried to put up a brave front as he opened the gates of the house, he was not looking forward to being alone that night. He settled down and called Sonali from the landline. He made up a story of the metro train breaking down and did not tell her of the events that took place. Convincing Sonali did not take long for Rohit, and he kept the phone down hurriedly as he wanted to shower to get rid of the smell. He calmed down after the bath as the smell of talcum powder was washed away. However, once he stepped out of the shower and got dressed in his night suit, he realized that although he did not smell of Talcum powder any more, the entire house did. It was as if the smell of talcum powder was travelling from room to room, roaming around the entire house.

Rohit felt nauseated. He opened the doors and windows of the house one by one. First, the balcony door, the drawing room, and then each of the bedrooms. Rohit went back to the drawing room to go to the balcony intending to get some fresh air but was perplexed to see the balcony door locked again.

'I swear, I had opened the door. It was wide open a minute ago. How did it close?' Rohit said loudly as he went to the bedroom to check the windows again. All the windows were closed. Rohit tried to open them again, but they did not budge, no matter how hard he tried. Nothing was making sense any more, and Rohit finally gave up. But as soon as he turned around, the windows opened, flapping as if during a storm, only that there was no storm outside, not even a breeze. The stillness outside was in direct contrast to the turbulence inside Rohit's home. As soon as Rohit turned towards the windows, the banging stopped. The windows were closed, and there was a stillness all around, all over again.

Rohit took a few steps back without turning his back towards the windows.

Nothing happened.

He slowly turned and walked towards the door of the bedroom. Everything was still. He held the door, expecting some movement somewhere. But nothing happened again. Rohit closed the door and locked it. He heaved a sigh of relief and decided to go to bed but was confounded at the events yet again. Sleep and his quilt had always been a great escape for Rohit. Did bad on the exam? Slip

under the quilt and do not get out until the anger of parents passed over. Bad breakup? There is no greater substitute for love than sleeping in a foetal position; and thus, in all uncomfortable situations, Rohit indulged in the only escape mechanism he knew—sleep.

Rohit slipped under the quilt, closed his eyes, and hoped this thing would be over soon. He stretched his hand out to switch off the lamp. He turned the switch off, but the light still flickered. He flicked it again, but nothing. The lights remained, flickering stubbornly.

Rohit stuck his head out of his quilt. As he removed the quilt from his head, the ceiling fan spun over him with full force but strangely anti-clockwise. Not only the fan, but the air conditioner too started to blast icy cold air. Within minutes, the entire room was freezing, and Rohit was cold to the bone. He was about to run outside but as he got up, the lights, fan, and air conditioner all switched off, and for a moment there was complete silence and darkness in the room. He sat on the bed, drenched in his own sweat because of fear. But movement outside his door startled him again. He could now hear the low hush-hush laughter of children, the way kids laughed when they were trying to hide something from their parents. Moments later, Rohit heard drawers being thrown out, cupboard doors opened and closed, and things taken out of almirah and thrown across the room. After a while, Rohit could hear the TV, a cartoon movie being played, and incessant laughter. *Are these children?* Rohit thought to himself.

Nothing made sense. He felt as if he had lost his mind. The sounds from the TV were now replaced by screeches against the wall, things dropping to the floor, the breaking of glass and utensils, and silverware being used. Suddenly, there was silence. Rohit could still hear muffled noises from the kitchen. He waited a few more minutes, expecting something else in some other corner of the house, but calmness prevailed for a while as Rohit planned to get outside. The kitchen was farther away from the bedrooms, nearer to the drawing room, and he could reach the main gate without being seen from the kitchen. Rohit calmed his senses, took a deep breath, and slowly opened the door, just enough to peek outside. There was no one in the lobby outside the bedroom but he could still hear the voices coming from the kitchen. He opened the door a little, just to make sure, before he rushed out of the room towards the door. He could now see the complete wall of the lobby. There were drawings all over the wall. Though Rohit was terrified, the drawings caught his attention. There were three kids, a man, and a woman whose faces were clearly sketched as if by a professional artist. What troubled Rohit further was that there was something relatable in the drawings. Something or someone he knew was in the picture.

The man! Of course, the man! The same man that sits outside the train station selling chips and biscuits was on his wall. But before Rohit could dwell deeper, the children's laughter distracted him. Rohit was jolted out of his thoughts. He told himself, 'This is not the time to think about these things, I have to get out of the house.'

Rohit made a dash and sped across the lobby. He made a conscious effort not to look in the kitchen's direction. His focus was simple: to get out of the house as quickly as possible. Fear carried his legs faster than he could have imagined. Rohit was out of the house in less than a minute. Once out, he ran and did not stop until he was out of its view. Rohit checked his watch; it was almost two at night.

'I can't go to anyone's house at this time of night, and no one will believe my story. I still can't believe this is happening to me,' he muttered.

Rohit decided to walk towards B-6 market and spoke to himself for comfort, 'The guard who sits outside the ATM knows me well. I can sit with him till morning and then at the break of dawn, I will go back to the metro station and look for that guy under the tree. That guy must know something about this. He is bound to have some answers. Yes, he definitely knows something about these kids. Come to think of it, I have not even seen these kids. I have only heard their voices. Oh, Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Did I see the same kid on the metro train line?' Rohit exclaimed. 'And are they the same kids that the auto driver saw? I am certain that the kid I saw on the train, the kids that disappeared from the bike and the kids that are in my house are all the same. But who are these kids? Are they human or ghosts? They are certainly not human.'

A nudge from the ATM guard broke his monologue.

'Sir ji, chai,' the guard extended his arm, offering a cup of kindness to Rohit.

'Thank you, sir,' Rohit took the tea. 'Yaar, tell me one thing,' Rohit asked the guard, 'Do you believe in ghosts?'

The guard gave him a wry smile. He pointed towards Deer Park, which was at the opposite side of the road.

'Sir ji, I have been sitting here every night for the last ten years. That Deer Park, right there, is filled with graves and monuments that are over 700 years old. The things I have seen here, if I ever tell anyone, they will never believe me. But I have seen and heard enough to believe that ghosts exist.'

There was a minute of silence between the two, as if both were revisiting their own experiences of the things unsaid and unknown. In an hour, the first rays of dawn cracked through the dark. Rohit bid goodbye to the guard and walked back home to pick up his dad's bike from the house, the keys to which he had grabbed the night before in a jiffy. The early morning light had given him some courage

and hope to go back to the house and pick up the bike. As he started the bike, he reluctantly looked up at this first-floor flat, not sure what exactly he was looking for. It was quiet.

The ride to Subroto park was uneventful. Rohit finally felt as if he was getting away from it all. And then he smelled it again. Talcum powder.

But he kept speeding towards Dwarka Sector 9. He could feel in his gut that the answer to this mystery was with the man who sat under the tree. His nervousness increased as he got closer to the metro station. He was sweating profusely and had trouble holding on to the handle; his mouth was dry, and he felt like he was being kicked in the gut, again and again. Rohit reached the metro station and could see the tree from a distance. He still could not make out if that man was there, but he did not have to wait; the man soon appeared.

As soon as the man saw Rohit, he kept the chips, biscuits and toys under the tree. Rohit sensed the talcum smell leaving him and moving towards the tree, where that man had kept his things. Within seconds, everything disappeared—the chips, biscuits, toys. Everything. And Rohit somewhat felt relieved and calm, something he had not experienced since he had sat under the tree last night.

The man walked towards Rohit and stood in front of him with his head bowed down, as if he held himself responsible for whatever was happening, but he did not speak a word. Rohit was seething with anger. He held the man's collar and screamed, 'What the hell is going on here? Who are you and who are these kids, things, or whatever they are? I know you have something to do with them.'

The man did not utter a word.

Rohit never found out who those kids were, but he told Sonali everything.

Although Sonali was relieved that Rohit got out of the situation, she still wanted to get to the bottom of who they were. She started speaking to the villagers who had tilled the land at Dwarka, and whose land was acquired to develop the sub-city. And after trying for a while, Chowdhary Surjan Singh, the erstwhile sarpanch of the village where Sector 9 stood now, told her the whole story.

The man you see sitting under the tree is Sohan Singh. He lived in the village with his wife and three children. It was a happy, loving family until his wife fell sick. She was not physically sick, but something went wrong with her mentally. At times, she would not recognize her children or her husband; other times, we would find her far away from home, and she would have no recollection of how she got there. Sometimes she would get aggressive without reason, and other times, she would cry. The family tried everything, but nothing seemed to cure her.

One evening, when Sohan Singh was not at home, the children started asking her for money to buy biscuits. She tried to talk them out of it, but they would not listen. She finally relented and decided to buy them biscuits and chips from the shop near the tree. She told them that they could sit under the tree and eat them. But before the children could even open a packet, she came from behind with a large stone and smashed their skulls. Then, as the children lay in a pool of blood, she casually picked up the blood-soaked packets and started eating them as if nothing had happened. She was arrested and then eventually sent to a mental asylum.

In a matter of a few minutes, Sohan Singh's life was overturned and, in a way, of those villagers too. It seemed the poor children never crossed over to the other side. We started spotting them—mostly coming back to get the biscuits and chips that got them killed. To pacify them, we built this platform around the tree and always kept chips and biscuits for the children so that they would not move out from there to hunt for them. Then the land was acquired for developing Dwarka and the villagers moved out. We managed to keep the platform around the tree the way it was, but it was not possible to keep chips and biscuits as we used to earlier because people would take them without realizing that the children's souls would get attached to them. Eventually, we decided that Sohan Singh would sit under the tree and provide the children with what they needed. All the villagers kept paying for the things for as long as we could.

That day, Rohit had reached before Sohan Singh could get there with chips and biscuits. The children got attached to him when they did not find what they wanted. Sohan Singh told me all about it.

Sonali and Rohit thanked Surjan Singh and felt at ease. Yet it took them a few months before they could return to the Sector 9 station. After hearing the truth about the children, they would leave an offering of chips or biscuits under the tree whenever they passed through the area.

ABOUT THE BOOK

You know Delhi for its rich cultural tapestry, history and monuments. You love it for its food—kebabs, chole-kulche, golgappe and chaat.

But do you know about the dark shadows that lurk in its all-too-familiar haunts—the arcades of Connaught Place, the gullies of Mehrauli, the lawns of Lutyens' Delhi, or the pillars and arches of the tombs in Hauz Khas?

The stories in *The Haunting of Delhi City* are set in a Delhi we think we know well, but don't. This is a Delhi that reveals the presence of the supernatural at every corner—ghosts as real to us in stories as they are in our imagination. Exquisitely chilling, each of these tales holds a piece of the city and its people—especially the ghosts.

Oh, these are just stories, you say. But are they? Come, have a read … if you dare.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jatin Bhasin is a management consultant, and a Dilli-wala at heart. Delhi is his obsession—its culture, food and especially its ghosts and djinns. He keeps the ghosts of Delhi alive on his Twitter handle @TheDilliMirror, where he tells short, fast-paced tales of hauntings in Delhi interspersed with the nostalgia of ’80s and ’90s Delhi and its pop culture.

Suparna Chawla Bhasin is a writer, editor and content specialist. She holds a master’s degree in English Literature from the University of Delhi. An avid cinema lover, she feels language is not a barrier to cinema. She is equally passionate about Tollywood as she is about Bollywood. On Sundays, you can find her either on a movie binge or fantasizing about vampires and werewolves, or scarfing down a pizza.

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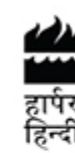

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